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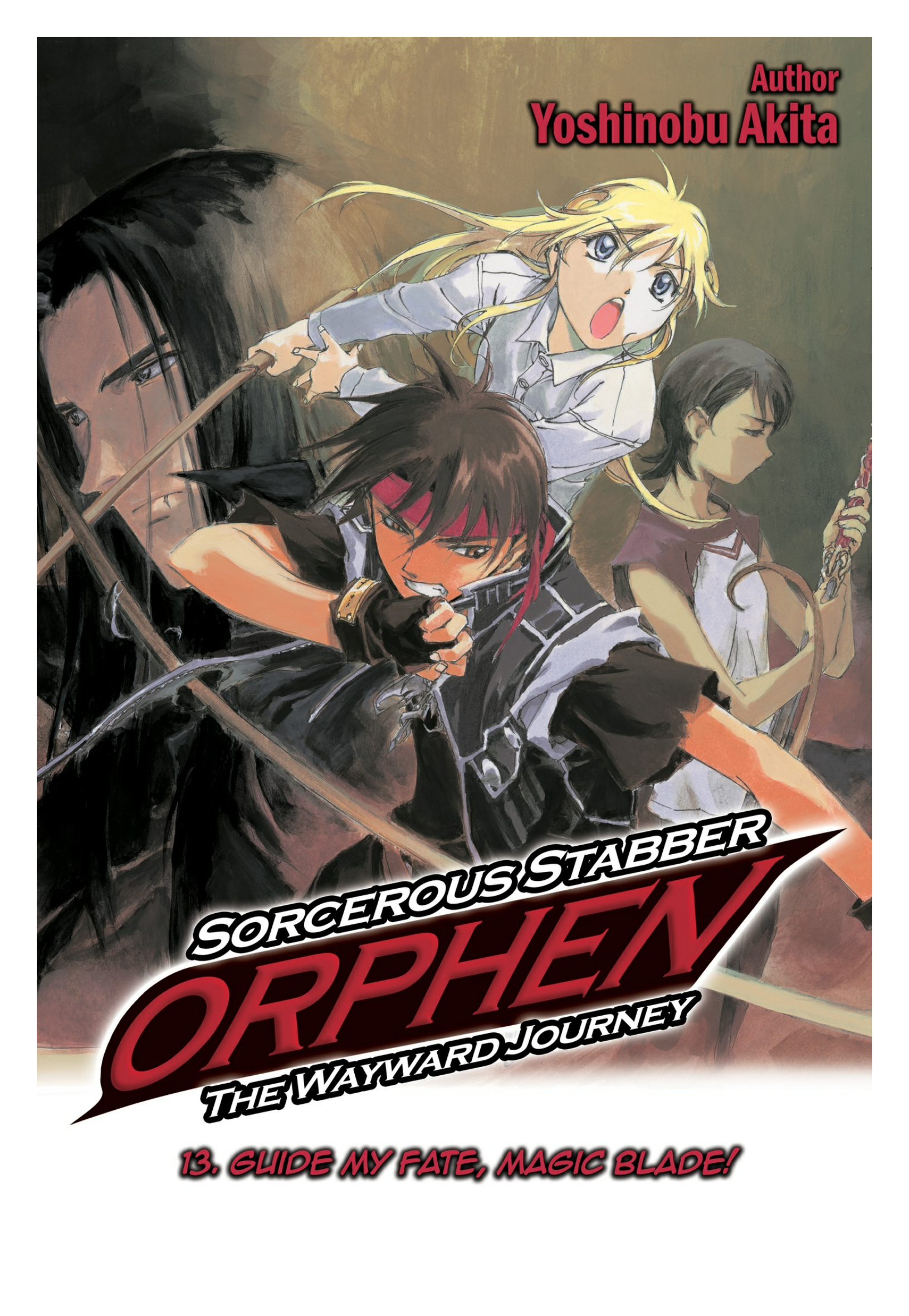


SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

13. GUIDE MY FATE, MAGIC BLADE!

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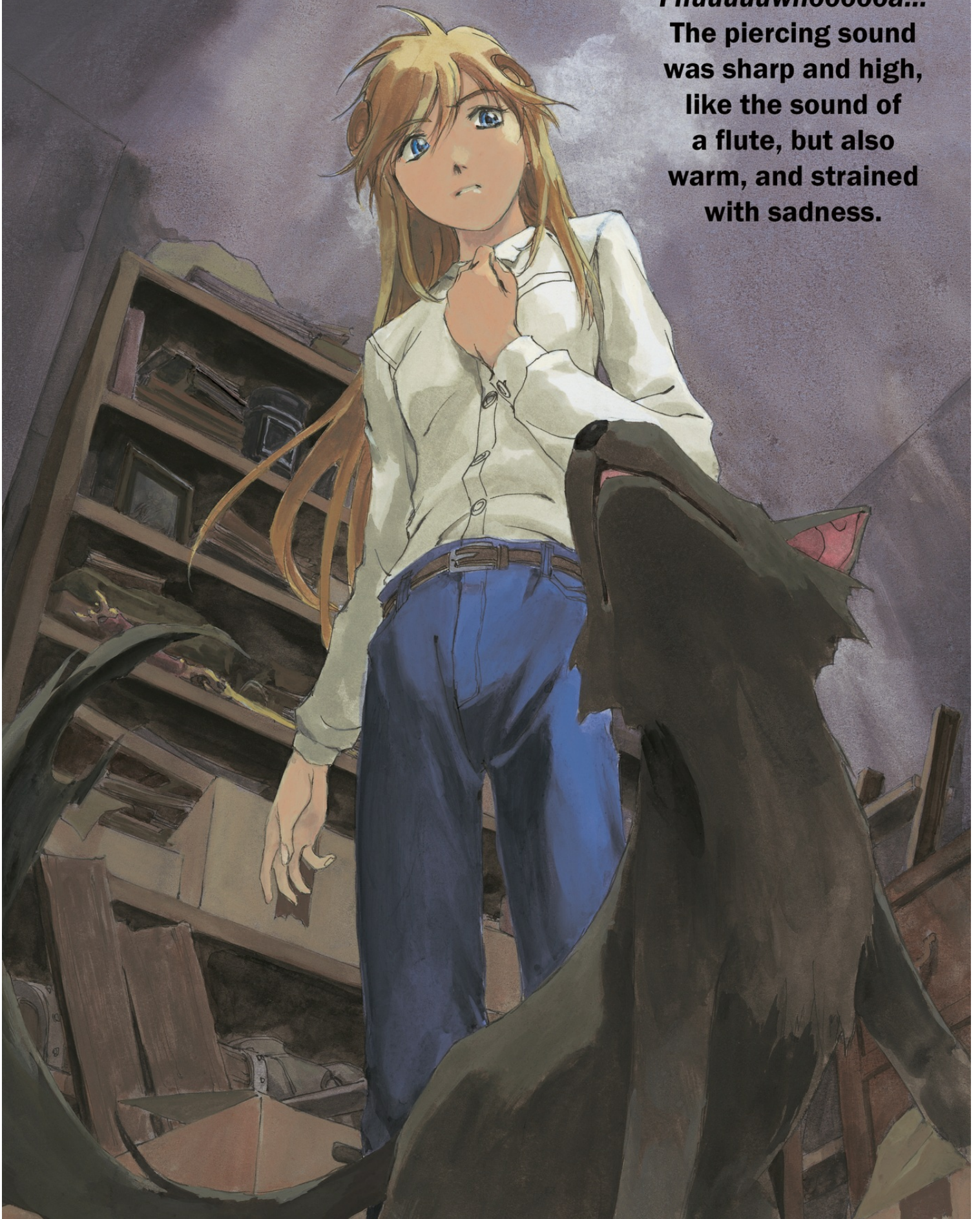


*Yeah, she's not winning this.
He could tell at a glance
that Lottecia's skills
far surpassed Claiomh's.*



“Fhuuuuuwhoooooa...”

**The piercing sound
was sharp and high,
like the sound of
a flute, but also
warm, and strained
with sadness.**



Orphen understood
something clearly then.
His own destruction was
bearing down on him.



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Prologue

She could clearly remember the words that her father had muttered when they'd left their hometown. Maybe that was just a ridiculous delusion—she knew she was just a child at the time, and there was no way she *could* remember such a thing.

But she was certain she knew. He had gazed back at their beautiful hometown with a strange expression caught somewhere between anger and sadness, shedding tears. His voice had been muffled, so quiet it seemed it might disappear with the wind. The surface of the lake had sparkled, smooth ripples moving across it, and the sun was gleaming brilliantly. The moss-covered trunk of a huge tree had sunk to the bottom of the lake, and countless silver fish had been swimming through its twisted roots. That vast body of water deep, deep in the forest had the beauty of a mirror, though it had looked cold as well.

That was a very sacred place, her father had told her years later. Perhaps she should say it had taken several years for him to be able to tell that to his daughter. In the end, she'd never managed to ask him what had caused his anger, or perhaps his sadness. He'd left her with many words unsaid, still hidden within his heart. Maybe he'd meant to tell her eventually. There was no way to know now just how much he'd left unsaid.

Their hometown—she'd never doubted the importance of the place to her father. She imagined he must have dreamed about the scenery there every so often. On the nights when they huddled together under one blanket to share warmth on a street that travelers never passed down, she imagined his recollections were particularly vivid. He would often stare at her, his daughter. It didn't particularly bother her being watched like that. But she would ask the night sky what she could do to erase the sadness in his eyes.

Her father sighed a lot—even though she warned him over and over not to. He probably sighed knowing he shouldn't. It was less like breathing and more like letting his vitality escape him, and as he sighed more and more as the long

years went by, he eventually wore himself down. It became clear to everyone around him as he became skinnier than other men his age. He was sick.

His condition changed for both the better and for the worse, almost as if to test the reflexes of those treating him. Eventually, after half a year of him weakening and having attacks, he became unable to even wander through his memories. There was nothing she could do—nothing anyone could do, unless they had the ability to manipulate fate. Expensive treatment and life-extending measures ate through their savings in no time at all, and her father's screams chipped away at her sleeping hours as well. "We'll have to tie him to his bed if this keeps up." One of the doctors had told her that while eyeing his broken glasses resentfully. She'd laughed. Tie him down? The eyes he'd stared sadly at her with were clouded and yellow now, wide open and swollen. Tie him down?

Two days after the doctors stopped visiting, her father died. His passing had been peaceful, either due to divine providence, or because he simply didn't have the vitality left in him to have a violent fit. She didn't care which one it was. Either way, she was thankful for the end of her father's suffering. Maybe his sadness never came to an end, but this was a small mercy. If there was any meaning in her prayers, she was thankful for it.

His words on his deathbed had been quiet ones. He'd held his sword close and looked at her with those same sad eyes, the same look he'd had when they had left their hometown. She thought so, at least. She couldn't help thinking the words he said then were the same as the ones he'd said when they'd left.

Her father, the great swordsman, left these words behind at the end of his life:

"No one is qualified to inherit the way of life of their predecessor... And even if they were, they would have to inherit their sins as well. Those who bear those sins must bear them carefully...and only on their own back."

Her father's eyes were no longer seeing anything at this point.

"If you desire to abandon your master and live your own life, that is all you can do."

Chapter I: Dawn of the Sword

“Mmmh...”

Claiomh stretched, sucking in a breath that filled her lungs with the scent of morning. The fresh scent tickled her nose. She wiped a tear that had squeezed out of the corner of her eye with the back of her hand and leaned on the windowsill. The outdoor scenery she was viewing over her shoulder was completely dyed in the hues of morning. She could see a long line of light-colored roofs stretching into the distance, because the inn they were staying at had been built on a small hill.

She felt something squirming restlessly on top of her head. With a giggle, she picked up the lump of black fur—the creature resembling a black puppy—from her head and hugged him to her chest, looking back outside again.

The morning sun was shining, bathing the town in light. Claiomh felt sleepiness still remaining behind her eyeballs, so she stretched again, holding the puppy, to try to shake it off. The puppy didn’t seem to have noticed that he had been removed from her head, and he was reaching around sleepily with his front paws, eyes still closed. He was probably trying to find her hair. He pawed around for a little while longer and eventually settled on the collar of her pajamas. He leaned against her shoulder, pressing his nose to her, and began snoring once more.

“Morning, huh...”

She muttered something totally obvious.

Her long blonde hair fluttered in the morning wind, under the light of the morning sun. Watching it with half-lidded eyes, she enjoyed sunbathing for a little while. The town was dead quiet, as if some sort of solemn ceremony was about to begin. The streets wouldn’t be bustling with people for some time yet. If there were anyone about, it would probably only be people delivering bread, maybe.

“I just kinda woke up...” Claiomh muttered, taking a long breath. She wasn’t talking to herself. She looked down at the puppy sleeping in her arms. “Even if you wake up early, there’s nothing to do staying in an inn like this... It’s not like I can borrow the kitchen to make breakfast. And Orphen and Majic probably won’t wake up until noon... What should we do, Leki?”

She called out to the puppy-like creature, Leki, but he didn’t answer her, of course. He must have heard her though, because his ears twitched.

“Puppy-like creature” was no exaggeration—Leki really wasn’t a puppy. Though if someone asked her what he was then, Claiomh would have to say that she didn’t actually know. She’d never had to explain this to someone else, of course.

If she were to borrow Orphen’s words—for she remembered these, vaguely, at least—Leki was something called a Deep Dragon. She’d met him a few months earlier, in a forest. Adult Deep Dragons were huge creatures that stood with their heads some three or four meters from the ground, but Leki was still only as big as a puppy.

She didn’t really know why, but he liked her. Well, things like that didn’t really need to have a reason behind them, or so she blithely accepted.

“Now that I think about it...” She gave Leki a pat on the back and looked up. “You’ve come a long way. This is the opposite side of the continent from Totokanta. We’ve just walked all the way to a place that would take a whole week on a steamboat to reach. You can brag to everyone when you get back,” she said, a little exasperated..

Maybe because she’d patted him on the back, Leki had raised his face and was looking up at her blankly. In his vibrant green eyes was a faint glow that resembled the rippling of light off of water’s surface. She was reflected in those eyes...not that she could see that herself.

“You brag to your mom about stuff, right?” Claiomh asked Leki, giggling to herself.

She looked outside again. The light-blue waves of wind were cold to her skin. It was chilly, refreshing weather.

“The weather’s nice.”

There wasn’t a cloud in the sky. The wind was clear enough that she felt like she could see the layers of air up above her.

“Let’s go on a walk,” Claiomh said, and nodded to herself. She pulled back from the window and closed it with one hand. Shutting the curtains, she set Leki down on the bed and clasped her hands, stretching once more.

She took her clothes out of the closet in the room.

This—everything up to this—was just another normal morning, the likes of which she’d experienced countless times before.



“...So, we’re still here.”

“Who’re you talking to, Majic?” Orphen asked as the boy mumbled to himself out the window.

Nashwater was a quiet town. The sort of place where the chill in the morning air lasted until noon. It was small-scale as “towns” on the continent went.

Orphen raised his head. The black-haired, black-eyed, perpetually black-clad man sighed a meaningless sigh. He stroked his jaw, then closed his mouth, and shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, what can we do? We don’t know where to go.”

That being said... *There’s no reason to stay here forever either.*

Nashwater was the closest town to the Kimluck-controlled Gate Lock region. Of course, there was so little exchange between Gate Lock and the rest of the world that most people on the east side of the continent thought of Nashwater as the northernmost town. Having no particular sights to see nor any local specialties to sample, the town’s only lifeline was that it was near a tourism site.

Its population was slightly high for its size at a little over twelve thousand. Resting at the base of a mountain, some sixty percent of the town was on a slope, so it couldn’t be called a very easy place to live. But it was blessed by nature, and since it was close to the industrially poisoned Urbanrama, they

tended to be compared to each other.

Majic turned to Orphen and frowned in frustration. The boy was about to turn fifteen, Orphen recalled. He'd always had a very expressive face, so he was easy to read when he was feeling any sort of negative emotion.

"But it's been two weeks since we came down from the Ledgeborne hot spring town."

So you're just bored, Orphen thought to himself with a sigh as his apprentice pursed his lips and complained to him.

Orphen found himself reaching up to his chest. There was a familiar sensation where a metal pendant hung, a crest of a one-legged dragon curled around a sword. The silver crest was a symbol of the highest authority on black sorcery of the continent: the Tower of Fangs. Fiddling with the pendant for a time, he mused in silence.

"But, you know..." There were any number of excuses he could make. "We're not traveling on a carriage to a destination like we were before... When we don't even know where we're going, I'm kind of reluctant to leave."

"Maybe so, but..."

"We've still got some money, so we're good on lodging fees for a little while still..."

"The money you got from Eris?"

"Yeah. We'll call it a reward for our work up there, I guess."

"...Did we actually do something?"

"Well, *you* didn't do anything," Orphen said with narrowed eyes, and reached down under the bed he was sitting on. His bag was right next to his feet. He rummaged around in it and took out a book.

It had been published by the Continental Sorcerers' Association, and was the most trusted atlas of the continent that people could get their hands on.

He opened the book to a familiar page—the same spot he'd opened the book to several times over the last few days. The page depicted the entire Kiesalhiman continent on a larger scale than it was on any other page.

Staring at the continent as a whole, Orphen groaned to himself. When Majic peered down at the nearby book, he glanced up at him and said, “So this is where we are right now...Nashwater.”

“The closest city’s Urbanrama.”

“Yep. It’s probably closer than Kimluck.” He pointed at the autonomous city of Urbanrama on the east coast and continued. “Urbanrama’s an independent city—not that that’s really all that rare anymore. In fact, Totokanta’s probably got it beat when it comes to independence from the central government. And Tefurem’s probably first on the list. Still, Urbanrama was the first independent city. Urbanrama’s said to control most of Nashwater’s capital. Supposedly Nashwater only exists because the royal capital didn’t want to pass the continental railway through Urbanrama, so they decided to extend it this way instead.”

“Huh...”

“And Ledgeborne, which used to be only a Celestial ruin, was probably made into a tourist spot as part of the same plan. Well, ultimately, plans for the railroad ended up changing a lot, and they’re still experimenting with it around the capital.”

“I’ve never seen it before. It’s like, a big metal road that a huge steam engine travels down, right?” Majic asked.

Orphen looked up at the boy and pretended not to notice the glimmer of anticipation dancing in his eyes. “Yeah, in theory it’s something like that. I’ve never seen it either, though.”

He returned his gaze to the map. There was a faint line trailing from Urbanrama to the royal capital of Mebrenst, and next to it was a notice printed in red: “Planned Transcontinental Railway—Incomplete.”

“I heard it’s faster and cheaper to travel by sea, so the project’s basically stalled right now. Though there’s a very limited number of people who use sections of it. There’s got to be quite a bit of technological innovation—more safety, more mobility, more speed?—before the plans can be revived to what they were originally.”

“Oh... So we won’t be able to take it,” Majic lamented.

Orphen shrugged as his pupil furrowed his cute little brows. “Well, most intercity exchanges are done by sea anyway. That’s probably enough trivia for now...” he went on. “In short, Nashwater is like Urbanrama’s kid. And Ledgeborne’s the grandkid, I guess. So, if we’re going in order, it makes sense to head for Urbanrama next, but...”

“Is there some reason why we can’t?”

He asks so nonchalantly... Orphen’s lips twitched in a wry smile that didn’t quite make it all the way out on his face. Maybe from the outside, it would look like he’d just smiled.

“Well, going in order’s fine, but if you keep extending the line, it goes all the way to the capital, right?”

“And you don’t want to go to the capital?” Majic hadn’t expected that. He was looking at Orphen with his eyes wide in surprise.

Orphen looked back at him and told him glumly, “Can’t really say I have good memories of the place, no...”

Orphen lifted the map up and took a look at the large fan-shaped capital of Mebrenst before closing the book. He left it at the head of the bed and folded his arms behind his neck.

Looking up at the grayish ceiling in the inn, he continued. “Part of me wants to just take a ship from Urbanrama back to the western side of the continent.”

“You want to go back?” Majic asked, even more surprised. “Go back...where? Totokanta?”

“Well, if you took a ship from Urbanrama, the first stop would be Tefurem.” Orphen waved his hand to cut the conversation short. He didn’t want to say any more before he could get his thoughts in order. “Anyway, if you’ve lost your destination, the best thing to do’s go back to your starting point.”

“Wouldn’t Totokanta be our starting point?”

“...Not for me.”

Majic didn’t seem to agree with him. He looked around as if trying to find the

words to say and, whether or not he was satisfied with what he found, the boy seemed to recall, “Claiomh’s looking forward to visiting the capital, you know.”

“Well, she can go by ship after we get back to Totokanta. It’s real easy.”

“No, I mean... Well, I don’t know what I want to say exactly, but I think she wants to go there next.” The blond boy spread his arms.

Orphen gave him a look, and his eyes started darting about as if trying to find more words to convince him.

He shrugged his shoulders and added, “I want to go there too...”

Now it was Orphen’s turn to find the right words. There were all sorts of ways to fill the space. Move your gaze about. Clear your throat. Change the subject. Sigh.

But Orphen just shut his mouth instead.

Outside his window, the sky still shone with the light of morning.



“Hmm. So, is this what you’re trying to say? If you fold that newspaper a hundred times, the world will be destroyed? Okay, I get it. I’ll call the nurse, so would you back up two steps?”

“No, Doctor Fury! It’s true! As a mathematician, I can tell you this: it might not be the *only* way to destroy the world, but it is certainly one of them!”

“I told you I get it.”

“I don’t believe you do get how frightening this information is! What I require is a prescription so that I may forget this forbidden knowledge I have learned.”

“We already fired Brutus, didn’t we? The man’s only flaw was that he hit his patients too much, but we really need him for things like this...”

“...”

Eventually, Claiomh got bored of standing on her tiptoes and watching the little “actors” move busily to the left and right during the puppet show. She tossed the last of her sherbet in her mouth.

The *Doctor Fury* puppet show out on the street reached its climax, and the

children gathered nearby watched with bated breath.

Claiomh crumpled up the paper bag that her sherbet had come in and glanced around. The vast sky above her caught her eye before the townscape of Nashwater. The cold wind blowing from the blue sky that extended out to the nearby mountains seemed to lighten the world around her.

Something black suddenly entered her field of view. Leki was looking down at her from atop her head. However, he was too close, so all he looked like was a lump of black at the edge of her view.

“Well, what should we do? Wanna head back?” she asked him.

The Deep Dragon made no reply, but Claiomh nodded to herself regardless.

“Yeah, Orphen and Majic might be up by now.”

Tossing the crumpled up paper bag into a nearby trash can, Claiomh left, giving the puppet show one last glance. There was only one person manipulating the dolls in the small box-shaped stage, yet by some trick or another, a third doll had appeared and leaped on the mathematician, holding him down.

“Aaah! Please listen to me, doctor! I must seal away the terrifying knowledge I have—”

Claiomh walked down the street, the shrill cries of the puppeteer echoing behind her.

It was still too early to call it “before noon,” but the sun had risen fairly high in the sky. Claiomh estimated that she’d spent some three hours or so wandering here and there. That was probably right, including the time she’d spent in a little café she’d found, where she’d had some hot milk.

“I’m not very tired. I wonder if it’s because I took a break,” she said to herself, picking Leki up off of her head and holding him to her chest instead. She looked down at him as he looked up at her, his nose twitching. “You do start to get bored of taking walks if you go on them every day, huh?” she complained. “I wonder how long Orphen plans on staying here.”

This town had a lot of hills, but if you chose your paths carefully, you could

spend most of the time walking downhill—though in theory you should have to climb the same amount you descend and descend the same amount you climb. Claiomh was already familiar enough with this town to grasp that much of its geography.

She'd put away the jeans she was used to wearing and was walking down a street with big flower beds in a new skirt, which didn't feel too bad. Time seemed to move slower in this town, and no one hurried anywhere. Claiomh didn't feel any particular need to go against the slow speed of the town, so she walked with a deliberate leisure to her step.

Though she'd always been a bit of a slow walker... Claiomh took a quiet breath as she reflected on the past. There had been a time when merely climbing stairs had been a challenge for her.

Wonder how Ende's doing... She felt a prick in her chest as she remembered a wet nurse who had been particularly kind to her. *She was all excited the last time I saw her because her granddaughter had been born, wasn't she? She said they were going to name her after me.*

Just then—

“Waaaaah!”

Claiomh jolted to a stop when she heard the scream. It was an agonized shout that was horribly out of place in this town full of flowers.

At the same time, there were a few dull impacts, and some aggressive shouts.

“Raaah!”

“Stand up, you bastard!”

Claiomh glanced around, blinking. She groaned, her fond recollections abruptly interrupted. “What’s going on...? A fight?”

There weren't that many people on the street, but it wasn't completely deserted. Yet the other people on the street merely gave each other dark looks and sped up, quickly walking past her. She heard one middle-aged man muttering to himself as he passed by her.

“Not them again...”

What's going on? Claiomh repeated to herself, focusing on the direction the passersby were glancing at. The shouts and blows were coming from a nearby alley.

When she reflexively turned in that direction, she had to admit to herself that it was less out of her sense of right and wrong and more out of simple curiosity. She moved Leki back from her arms to her head and swiftly turned down the alley.

The first thing she saw was red.

“Huh...?” she blurted out in surprise.

The alley wasn't that long. It quickly became a dead end. And at that dead end, there was a boy collapsed and covered in blood. The boy was surrounded by four men holding wooden swords.

She quickly realized that the same red fluid covering the unconscious boy's face was clinging to the men's wooden swords.

When she stopped, she felt something soft brush against her lower legs—she deeply regretted wearing a skirt today. Claiomh bit her lower lip and put her guard up, but no one had noticed her yet.

Though she'd thought of them as “men,” the aggressors didn't seem to be far from the collapsed boy in age. The oldest of them, a tall man who appeared to be in his twenties, had a nasty smile on his face, which made his intentions clear. That smile was the most frightening thing about the scene to Claiomh. It wasn't a vague sort of smile that anyone would wear on their face in their daily life.

The man's actual features could even be called attractive. He had thick eyebrows, a broad forehead, and a small scar on his lower lip. He had a roughness to him, but his long black hair also made him seem like a ladies' man, and though he was tall, he was slender too. In fact, he looked even thinner because of his height.

The clothes he wore were rather strange. He had a black tracksuit on, but it was sleeveless, so you could see his bulging shoulder muscles. It wasn't just this man who wore the strange outfit, though. The other three were in identical

black athletic wear. Maybe it was some sort of uniform.

While she was observing them, the man with the scar on his lip rested his wooden sword lightly on his shoulder and whispered down to the fallen boy, “I think you understand just how much your skill amounts to now, don’t you?”

Claiomh couldn’t imagine that the boy could hear him, but the man didn’t seem particularly bothered by that. He went on to his unresponsive listener.

“Next time you go out, you should choose a different street from us.”

“Heh. Pathetic.” One of the other three—they all looked the same to Claiomh—sneered.

Yet another one poked the boy’s bloody face with his wooden sword and said, “That makes three. Lottecia probably won’t keep quiet about this anymore.”

“Well, good,” said the last one.

“I’m tired of playing around with them. If we can finally settle things, then that’s perfect.” The man with the scar on his lip brought his sword up as he said this. His eyes were locked on to the boy at his feet as he stood with his wooden sword held aloft. It was crystal clear what he intended to do next.

But a split second before the wooden sword fell—

“Hey, stop that!” Claiomh shouted reflexively.

Having finally noticed her then, all four of them swiftly turned toward her.

No—it was only three who turned her way.

The man with the scar only gave her a glance. “Heh.” He let out a little puff of a laugh and swung his wooden sword down.

Thunk! There was a dull sound. The wooden sword hit the boy’s back, and his blood-covered body spasmed. It had looked like he’d only given the sword a light swing, but there was a power behind it that made his complete lack of hesitation clear.

The boy who’d been struck convulsed, and a disgusting gurgling sound came from him. He must have spat something up.

Claiomh backed up frightfully, giving the man with the scar a look. He’d left

the boy vomiting blood at his feet and was slowly turning her way.

With a faint smile on his face, he asked her, “You need something, little lady?”

She had to say something back to him—her instincts were telling her that. If she stayed silent, she knew she would only be able to cower from the man. She knew that, but nothing was coming to mind.

“D...” Only a strained sound came from her throat before Claiomh shook her head. “Don’t give me that! What are you guys doing?!”

“What do you think we were doing?” the man with the scar asked as if her question was completely inconsequential.

“I...”

While she struggled to answer him, an opaque light seemed to glint in the man’s eyes. As if the four of them were somehow linked, they all took a step toward her with the same movements. And they all had dangerous smiles on their faces, which sent a chill down her spine.

The first one to speak was the one with the scar. “Well, you’ll find out soon enough.” He shrugged. “We’ll give you the whole rundown.”

“Yeah, with all the details,” another man said with a different sort of dangerous grin on his face.

She didn’t know which one had spoken. Claiomh was focused solely on the man with the scar on his lip. She reached down quickly in search of her sword, but...

Of course I didn’t bring it...

She clucked her tongue. The sword was back in the inn—in Majic’s bag, to be more precise.

Even while this was happening, the men were getting closer, wooden swords in hand, and Claiomh had no way to defend herself, since she was unarmed.

What do I do?

Claiomh tried to keep her adversaries in check with her eyes as they advanced, though she had to admit to herself that it didn’t have much of an

effect. She frantically thought through the situation. The best thing to do would be to run. It was only a few meters back to the street she'd originally come from. But if she ran, she didn't know what would happen to the boy collapsed in the back of the alley, and the men didn't really seem like the type to give up just because she'd gone somewhere with more people around.

There's nothing I can do to defend myself without a weapon...

Just then, she felt something move atop her head. Leki had stood up.

"Huh?" Claiomh said. She thought she'd heard something.

At the same time, the man who was closest to her lifted up his sword and leaped at her.

Crap! Claiomh twisted, trying to dodge. But she was taken by surprise, so she knew she wouldn't make it in time. She raised her arms to protect her head, prepared to take the blow. She knew the sword was headed straight for Leki, and for a vital spot that would probably knock her out with one hit. And no matter how strong the blow was, she knew that falling unconscious was the one thing she could not do. The danger if she passed out was clear from the eyes of the men lunging at her.

However...

Clang! There was a sharp sound, and neither the impact nor the pain she was expecting came. That sound was the only thing she heard.

Claiomh looked up wordlessly. The first thing she saw was the man who had attacked her. Something had repelled him, and he was standing there with his eyes wide in shock. Then...

"A sword?"

There was a completely white sword floating there as if to protect her. It had apparently deflected the man's wooden sword.

The white sword fell to the ground with a clatter, and Claiomh hurriedly picked it up.

It's...not a sword. Is this made of stone?

When she picked it up she found it was nothing more than a hunk of rock in a

cross shape. She glanced to the side and found an indent in the exact same shape and size in a nearby building's wall. It must have come from there.

Leki made this for me.

Holding the sword in both hands, Claiomh faced off against the group of men. The stone sword didn't even have a blade, but considering the fact that it didn't break from a blow from one of the wooden swords, it was probably tougher than ordinary stone. In any case, as long as she had a weapon, she could defend herself.

She might even be able to do more than that... Claiomh gulped, looking at the boy who was still collapsed in the back of the alley. She didn't know who he was, but she was sure that if he wasn't treated quickly, he'd be in danger.

"Wh...Where the hell did she pull a sword from?!" the man groaned, still on the ground.

He seemed to think Claiomh had been hiding the sword. Well, normally you wouldn't assume that it had been carved out of a wall with sorcery by the puppy on her head.

"Alright, I'm not holding back against this bitch!" Another man leapt forward —

Claiomh raised the stone sword and blocked the blow raining down on her at an angle. There was a numbing impact with the blow, but Claiomh took half a step back with one leg and endured it.

The man swept his sword down to hit her front leg, which she raised, managing to dodge the blow.

She *wanted* to counterattack as she dodged, but her arms were still numb. Comforted by her lack of retaliation, the man moved to his third blow—a sweep from left to right, aimed squarely at her side.

She reacted instantly. She was up against multiple foes; she couldn't stay on the defensive forever.

"Haaah!" With a short breath, Claiomh swung her sword down on the hand her attacker was holding his sword with. The sword traced a sharp line in the air

—

“Ngh?!” With the man’s grunt, the sword disappeared. It slipped from his crushed hand and flew off in a random direction.

“Waaah!” The man crumpled to the ground, holding his hand. Two of his fingers were bending in an impossible direction. There was no need to bother with him anymore.

Claiomh hardened her gaze and held her sword up once more at the remaining three men.

Well, that went well... she told herself as she broke out into a cold sweat.

Considering the difference in their reach and physical strength, her opponent probably hadn’t imagined he’d be taken out in one blow. True, physical strength didn’t really mean much when you were hitting someone with a hunk of rock, but it also affected the speed of one’s weapon. In a direct contest, the man’s sword should have hit first. But if you aimed for the very part of the opponent that was headed toward you, the difference in reach and speed was canceled out. All you needed was precise aim and the decisiveness to carry out your attack, both of which could be mastered with practice.

When your enemy had more physical strength than you, you had to take them out with surprise attacks like this. Claiomh had been thinking about this ever since the time she’d had Orphen supervise her sword practice, but she didn’t think the idea would come in handy all of a sudden like this.

“Impressive,” said the man with the scar on his lip, his tone somehow sounding old-fashioned. He spoke while barely moving his scarred lips.

“Bro!” The other men finally piped up nervously. The man who’d broken his fingers was backing up unsteadily as well, enduring the pain in his hand.

Without answering the man who’d called him “Bro,” the scarred man simply took a step forward. Eyes cold, he let his sword hang limp in his hand and said, “You really are impressive. You a friend of Lottecia’s?”

Claiomh knit her brow in confusion, which seemed to be a good enough answer for the man. He didn’t ask her any more questions.

Instead, he leaped forward.

Without even time to scream in surprise, Claiomh took the blow of his wooden sword with her stone one.

The man struck at her, from above, from both sides, in a rhythmic flurry, and Claiomh couldn't defend against all of his strikes. She evaded two or three of them by taking large steps backward.

Claiomh clenched her teeth. *He's fast!* It was more his feet that she was watching than his sword. His feet slid swiftly across the ground as he moved. She couldn't actually see the movements of his sword, so she was dodging his attacks on instinct, but that was becoming harder to do.

And there was another disadvantage she was dealing with...

My skirt... The fabric coiling around her legs was hindering her movements. Each brush of the garment against her made her more anxious, made worse by the fact that she was so conscious of it. Things were going well for her now, but she didn't think she could keep it up for that much longer.

The strategy she'd used earlier probably wouldn't work again. She'd need to come up with another secret weapon.

Shf. She slid her feet to a stop and held her sword down at her hip.

Her foe naturally prepared for a thrust, but at the same time, he probably relaxed, meaning he'd let his guard down.

He won't be able to dodge this! Claiomh feinted, thrusting her sword forward and bending into a crouch instead. She spun her whole body and struck out at her foe's ankles, intending to sweep his feet out from under him. The reason she'd crouched down was so that he wouldn't be able to sense where her blow was coming from; she wanted to take him by surprise and avoid any counterattacks. Her field of view shifted, but just when she thought she'd seen her target, the man's ankles—

"Huh?"

Claiomh stopped. Her stone sword clattered fruitlessly off of the asphalt. Her target was completely gone from in front of her.

Bang! There was an impact behind her eyes.

That's what it felt like, at least. A burning sensation seemed to fill her skull. It was a warning. Blood. Pain. Injury. A warning of such things.

Her body was floating. Or maybe it was just lying on the ground. Claiomh pulled her limbs close and prayed—*stop*. It had to stop. She had to free herself from the floating sensation, get up, make sure she wasn't hurt too badly...and if possible, get away.

Everything but the last, she was able to quickly accomplish after snapping herself out of it. When she came to, she was looking at the sky. A sliver of indigo peeking out from between the walls of the alley. She must have been lying on her back. She tried to get up, but her back was numb, and she couldn't. She must have been struck there.

She raised her head at least, and her eyes immediately met those of the man with the scar on his lips, who looked down at her with his wooden sword in hand. She gasped and shuddered.

She tried to ignore the pain and numbness and stand up anyway, but the man stepped forward soundlessly. He lazily swung his sword down.

Clang! With a cold sound, the tip of the sword thrust down to the ground in between her thighs. She couldn't move.

Wordlessly, Claiomh tried to take in the situation she was now in—she no longer had a sword in her hand. She must have dropped it somewhere. Leki was still on her head. If possible, she'd wanted to avoid doing so in the middle of town, but at this point, she might need to get help from this baby dragon...

But... *Not yet...* She needed to clarify the situation before she resorted to that. Claiomh told herself that, trying to keep her cool. Of course, if she was really in danger, she didn't intend to hold back.

The man was still silent, and there was no emotion in his dark eyes. At some point, he'd gotten around her so that he was closer to the alley's exit—meaning, along with the other three men, she was surrounded. From the fact that her back had been attacked, it was easy to guess what had happened. The moment she'd crouched down and struck out, the man had probably leaped

over her to get behind her. She'd been trying to take him by surprise, but he'd ended up doing the same thing to her.

"If you're not Lottecia's friend..." the man suddenly asked her, "then why'd you cross me?"

"What?" Claiomh was silent for several seconds, unable to understand what he meant. When she realized her mouth was hanging open, she finally figured out what she wanted to say. "Isn't it obvious? That kid was gonna die."

She wanted to point back to him, but she was afraid of what would happen if she moved, so she just used her gaze to vaguely indicate the back of the alley.

The man's expression didn't change. "Just a busybody, then," he muttered.

Claiomh heard one of the men scoffing behind her.

"What's so funny?!" she shouted, losing her cool.

"True—it's not funny. It's rather dull, in fact." The man with the scar on his lip almost looked like he'd forgotten how to laugh entirely. "You didn't think you could do something like this and just walk away, did you?"

"I..." Every time she spoke, her back hurt—she must have been hit hard. But she tried not to think about it as she continued. "I just did what I wanted to do."

"Oh yeah? Then, we'll just do what we want to do. How's that sound?"

She heard footsteps behind her. The other three men must have been moving. She felt like she could hear vulgar laughter coming from behind her too.

It sounds bad! Claiomh thought to herself scornfully.

Leki was still curled up comfortably on her head—apparently, to a Deep Dragon, this was not a dangerous situation. Right when Claiomh opened her mouth to ask him to attack—

"Wait right there."

?! Claiomh bit her tongue, thinking the voice was telling her to stop, but she quickly realized that it was actually directed at the men.

The voice didn't belong to the man with the scar on his lip or any of the other

three men. Orphen's face sprang to Claiomh's mind for a second, but it hadn't sounded like him at all. In fact, the affected air of it and the tone were leagues apart. This was a voice she'd never heard before.

The scarred man swiftly drew back his sword and turned around—the voice had come from the entrance to the alley—like he'd forgotten about Claiomh entirely.

There was a young man there. She couldn't guess at his age, so that was the most accurate description she could come up with. His flippantly cabbage-colored clothes almost looked like a dance leotard. Glancing at the athletic wear worn by the scarred man and his friends, Claiomh wondered if there was anyone in this town who dressed decently.

For the time being, she stood up, furrowing her brows. Retreating to the side of the alley, she watched as the three men who had been approaching her from behind sped past her. They stood next to the scarred man, where they all faced off against the new man.

They seemed to know the young man—not one of them asked him to identify himself. They raised their swords and threatened him as if they had a prior agreement to do so when they met. The scarred man alone didn't bother with his sword, instead crossing his arms and staring down the young man.



As a strange tension filled the space, Claiomh decided to run back to the boy still collapsed in the back of the alley. She crouched down and surveyed the boy's injuries—at a glance, it was clear to see that his wounds were serious. His hair was caked with blood and starting to stiffen. These injuries could have killed him, but he was still alive. His back rose and fell slightly where he lay face down.

"Leki," Claiomh urged.

She could feel him shifting atop her head. The boy's wounds closed up in front of her eyes. A Deep Dragon's sorcery could heal most injuries, she recalled Orphen telling her once before. He'd even said they might be able to bring the dead back to life. Not that she expected Leki to be capable of that just yet.

That should do it. Relieved, Claiomh looked back toward the entrance to the alley. The situation hadn't changed: an unknown young man and an unknown group of men were still staring each other down. No, the young man had a little smirk on his face. He was smiling.

What's with him? Claiomh quietly wondered. She couldn't imagine her situation had improved all that much. She didn't know who the young man was, and even if he was trying to help her, she didn't know if he could be relied on. So she thought as she watched the man with the scar on his lip. She didn't think the other three were anything special, but that man was different. Even if two or three cops came running, she didn't think she'd relax.

And so she tried not to expect anything from the young man, so that she wouldn't let down her guard. She kept her center of gravity low, so that she could take action at any time.

However...when she saw the expression on the young man's face, Claiomh got the distinct sense that she was worrying for nothing. After all, he was still smiling.

It wasn't a fool's smile or an obsequious one. It was like he was taking a test when he knew what the answers were. In his hand, he held a wooden sword, same as the other men. Claiomh wondered if he was trying to appear elegant as he stroked the sword with a finger. Maybe he was pulling off the sort of elegance you'd find at a cheap theater, she thought.

Above his green...leotard? He wore a slightly darker jacket. He had pants on too, but the same green of the leotard extended out from the hem, so his underlayer must have covered his entire body. He wore actual leather shoes, but that was about the only piece of clothing that looked decent on him. Everything else on him seemed somehow fake.

His hair was an unusual faded blond. It was less golden and more cream-colored. His narrow eyes darting about, he parted his thin lips and issued a shrill warning:

“Heh... I didn’t want to think that rumor about you guys hunting our trainees was true!”

“Shut up!” one of the men—not the scarred one—shouted bluntly, but the young man didn’t react, like he hadn’t even heard him.

He raised his square jaw in a gesture of disappointment. It was so blatant it almost made Claiomh suspicious, but in any case, the young man didn’t seem to intend to hide his sadness.

“As those who aspire to master the sword, it may only be natural for petty squabbles to occur between us, but I had hoped that deep down, we could understand one another...”

“Ryan...” the man with the scar on his lip named him.

The young man spun theatrically to face him and responded, “Yes, Ed?”

Even called by his name, the scarred man showed no reaction. He just shrugged and said what he wanted to say emotionlessly. “Personally, I think those ‘petty squabbles’ are the only reason for swords to exist.” His tone seemed more casual than it had before, Claiomh realized, though she didn’t know what that meant.

Once again, Ryan shook his head with that affected elegance. “Has Lottecia not suggested cooperation between us many times before?”

“In a certain sense, I believe I *am* cooperating.”

“Sorry, but she’s a stubborn one. She does *not* want to hand the sword over to you.”

When they heard that, a jolt seemed to go through the men—but just for an instant. They soon regained their composure.

The scarred man, Ed, alone, had a sneer on his face. “And do you agree with her?” His voice was like soft needles. They might not hurt, but they would prick you. They might even pierce you through.

Ryan chuckled. “Of course, I’ll go along with what Lottecia wants.”

“I see.”

That seemed to be the end of their conversation. The men spread out. With as much space to wield their swords as they could get in the limited space of the alley, they stood at a distance from each other, and Ed brought his wooden sword back up as well, glaring at the blond boy.

Ryan only laughed quietly, his smile changing from one of confidence to one of pity. It must have been clear to everyone there.

“There’s no getting out of this, I suppose.” He lifted his sword up and faced off against the four opposing him. “It’s unfortunate... I don’t want to kill talented youths like you. Now, taste the special technique I, Ryan Spoon, obtained some two days ago!”

The man brought his sword up with a *whoosh!*—the motion was so bombastic that the sound effect immediately came to mind—and lunged forward toward the other four men!

“Secret skill: Apeman Slaughter, ook ook!”

Wham!

Thud, thonk, wham, bam, bish, bosh, wham, whoom, crack, clunk, stomp stomp stomp...

Claiomh silently watched the scene play out from afar.

The first sound was Ryan slamming his sword into the ground two meters in front of his enemies.

The next thing she heard was Ed’s sword crashing into Ryan’s face as the other man scrambled to pick up his own weapon.

Next, another man's sword sunk into his side. Then another sword struck his shoulder. Ryan fell on his face. Swords rained down on his backside. Etcetera...

A few seconds later—that was probably all it took—all that was left was a black and blue Ryan convulsing on the ground and the other four men looking down on him.

The only sounds filling the alley then were the men's labored breathing.

After a little while, Ryan staggered to his feet. His hair was disheveled and his face was covered in dirt, but without wiping it off, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled something out of it. "...Here." It looked like a wallet. He handed it to one of the men and then bowed his head expressionlessly.

"Well, see you." Ed and the other men took the wallet and left the alley like this was a regular occurrence.

A breeze blew by.

Ryan turned to Claiomh with a smile and gave her a thumbs-up. "Looks like we're saved."

"Hmm... Well, I guess you could say that," Claiomh muttered, eyes narrowed as she watched the young man smile at her, teeth sparkling.

Ryan walked over to her, not looking the least bit concerned. He crossed his arms thoughtfully and shook his head. "Hmmm. To think my special, secret skill would be bested... It's absurd."

"Is it...?" Claiomh asked. While she was at it, she added, "What's with you, anyway?"

"Ha ha! Just a competitive swordsman, Ryan Spoon—though there's no need to know my name."

"...There isn't, huh?"

"Well, there's no need to know it, but it seems you already do!"

"Since you told me," she pointed out, but Ryan ignored her.

He bowed and asked, "I don't suppose you'd tell me your name?"

"It's Claiomh. This is Leki."

“Fine names... As if they were made for a girl and a black puppy.”

“I would hope so...”

Once again, Ryan ignored her comment. His eyes shifted to the boy collapsed on the ground. “My, I just remembered the bloody trainee on the ground,” he said, not sounding particularly surprised.

“You forgot about him?”

Yet again ignoring Claiomh, Ryan knelt down next to the boy, who was apparently a trainee. After a careful inspection of the boy, he gave an impressed grunt. “Hmm... Pretty skillful of him to bleed so much without any wounds.”

Naturally, he didn’t have any wounds, since Leki had closed them up with sorcery. He probably wasn’t in too much danger now.

Looking down at Ryan’s light blond hair, Claiomh told him, “Leki healed him. He was badly hurt before... I wonder if those guys were actually trying to kill him.” She spat the last sentence out toward the four men who’d already run off.

Ryan rose and stared down at Claiomh’s chest—she stepped back instinctively, but he appeared to be observing Leki in her arms.

After giving the curiously sniffing baby dragon a look, he said, “Oho. Contrary to its looks, this little beast is quite the doctor.”

“I-I guess so.”

“That’s a convenient pet you’ve got.”

Apparently, he’d accepted the fact that Leki had healed the boy without any particular suspicion (and without confirming that Leki was in fact a dragon). That might have been something very unusual, but Claiomh decided not to think too hard about it. There were probably people like that out there. There was something more important that she wanted to say, anyway.

“He’s not my pet. He’s my friend.”

Ryan nodded. “I see. Even better if he’s a friend. It’s like writing ‘formidable enemy’ but reading ‘close friend.’”

“No, it’s not really like that...”

“In that case, I’d love it if he could heal my injuries as well.”

“For some reason, I don’t really want to...” Claiomh grimaced and looked Ryan over. He was beat-up, but... “I mean, you’re not even injured...”

That was when she realized: ...*He’s not injured?*

He’d been absolutely pummeled with wooden swords, but he had no visible injuries. With the beating he’d taken, it wouldn’t be surprising if he’d collapsed with the same grievous wounds as the boy.

Yet he was completely unharmed, aside from some dishevelment of his hair and clothes.

“Umm, are you...okay?”

“Meaning?”

“Well, you kinda got the crap beaten out of you. And with wooden swords. I’m surprised you can still move.”

“Heh...” He put his pointer finger to his brow and closed his eyes. Maybe he had been waiting for her to ask that question. “It is my honor and duty to succeed the secret techniques of my school. I may not compare to Lottecia, but my tempered body shan’t yield to petty injuries like these.”

“Huh...” She didn’t quite accept that explanation, but she also couldn’t come up with a reason to argue with him. “So who’s this Lottecia everyone keeps going on about?”

“The goddess of the sword,” he replied swiftly.

“Goddess?”

“I’ve piqued your interest, haven’t I?” Ryan leaned forward, pointer finger raised.

Claiomh nodded ambiguously. “W-Well, after all this commotion, I guess...so.”

“Very well.” Ryan bowed and then indicated the fallen trainee. “Would you mind holding his legs, then? If you help me carry him to the dojo, I will enlighten you on the essence of our swordsmanship.”

Unable to find words to refuse, Claiomh put Leki back on her head and picked up the legs of the limp trainee. *At which point was it exactly that my peaceful morning came to an end?*

Chapter II: Goddess of the Sword

“Huh? Yeah, I know. I’ll get it back. That’s fine, isn’t it? I don’t have a ‘plan’ per se, but things are moving along on schedule.”

Helpart leaned back against the bench, gazing up at the sky.

There was no one in the park that morning, so no one was around to hear his muttering. The words drifted about, fading away in the cool autumn air. There was a period of silence, and then he corrected himself.

“I know my role, and I’ve never screwed up a job before... Well, not too many times, at least. I want you to just leave it to me. It’ll get all screwy if you guys get involved. You should really be more conscious of your lack of delicacy in these matters. That’s the whole reason you need someone like me.”

He looked about thirty—maybe a little younger. Several imperfections in his face made his age hard to pinpoint. There was a light in his eyes. Pale blue irises. They looked more like jelly than gemstones. Wet with tears, his eyes gave off the same color as the sky above him. His face was slack, completely without expression. He looked like a set of clothes that were missing stitches, so they were falling apart, but still managing to maintain a basic human shape. Curly blond hair framed his ears and hid beneath his collar.

He wore a high-class suit, but it was clear that a bit too much time had passed since it was last cleaned properly. There was no pin fixing his slack tie to his jacket.

No one was around, but he still continued to speak.

“No, I haven’t forgotten. I don’t want to lose this continent either.” There was a cynical smile on his face as he spoke. “But we’re only in the same boat, not of the same mind.”

This time, the silence lasted a while longer. He closed his mouth and looked up at the sky, staring far into the distance.

A few withered leaves fluttered across the stone pavement in the park. You

could say they were being lazy keeping it clean after going out of their way to plant deciduous trees in the park, but at the same time, it made for a good view.

He could see some passersby from the bench too, but not one of them paid any mind to him.

That's how it goes, he thought to himself. Everything passes me by. That's how it goes...

None of that mattered. He sighed and opened his mouth again.

"Yeah." He couldn't nod looking up at the sky, but he narrowed his eyes in acknowledgment. "I know what you want. The fact that you sent me means you're hoping for success."

He took a breath, then muttered, "Give me power once again. It is my greatest wish. I know."

It wasn't that he didn't want to nod. It was just that he was uneasy about taking his eyes off of the sky. Off of the beautiful clouds in the sky, which were only there because it had been so long since Kiesalhima had seen a great storm blow them away.



If asked whether he'd said what he really meant, even Orphen would have to think twice.

He walked down the street, thinking to himself gloomily. There were all sorts of people on the gingko-lined pathway: housewives on their way back from shopping, kids walking their dogs, couples walking arm in arm, portrait artists waiting for customers. Even if he strolled absentmindedly down the street, it was wide enough that he wouldn't bump into anyone. Maybe that was why Orphen found himself vaguely thinking about things.

He snapped out of it when he heard Majic say, "She's not here," from behind him. Orphen looked back and found the blond boy glancing about in every direction. "I wonder where Claiomh went."

Orphen cleared his throat. "Y-Yeah... Well, I don't think we really need to

worry about her.”

It was about an hour later that they realized that Claiomh wasn't in her room. Of course, Orphen knew that she liked to walk around town when she had free time, and he couldn't imagine there was all that much danger to be found in Nashwater of all places.

The only reason he was out here searching for her was because he happened to be in the mood for a walk. It was the stereotypical “change of pace” one took when they reached some sort of impasse, but Orphen smiled wryly when he considered the problem he was trying to solve.

I mean, where do you even start when you want to look for your sister who's just shot off to the end of the world somewhere?

The world outside Kiesalhima. This might have been the first time he'd really considered such a thing. Of course, he'd had some vague sense of a place outside of the continent, but he had basically thought of it as a myth—the Giant's Continent. The land of the gods. But it wasn't just him—the most anyone on the continent knew about the outside world was a simple vague jumble of phrases like that. As far as Orphen knew, no one had left the continent in the last several hundred years, and no one had arrived from beyond it either.

Aside from his sister, at least.

Azalie... Orphen called his sister's name without speaking aloud. *I wonder if Forte's heard anything about where she is through his network.* Orphen thought to himself, picturing the face of an older student who should still have been back at the Tower of Fangs. He couldn't imagine the inexpressive, boorish face smiling, but still, it was a nostalgic sight.

If I want to find Azalie, I have basically two options: either I rely on Forte's network, or I look for the white sorcery fort—the Misty Falls.

In Kimluck, Pope Ramonirok had declared white sorcery to be the key to escaping the continent. Orphen didn't know what the pope had meant by that, but if it was true...they might know how to find Azalie now that she had left the Ayrmankar barrier.

Of course... *After the way I crossed the upper management, it'd be pretty dangerous to go back to the Tower, and even if I looked for the Misty Falls, there's no guarantee I'd actually find it...* He wasn't totally without leads, but he was still pretty stumped. The Tower of Fangs was probably his best bet, but...

"Hm?" Orphen stopped and Majic, who was walking right behind him, bumped into him.

"Ow," came the boy's voice. "What was that for, Master?"

Orphen raised a hand silently and narrowed his eyes. There was a group of people on the street that wasn't quite a crowd, and among them was someone who caught his eye.

"It couldn't be...but..." he groaned. Majic had come around beside him and was curiously peering at his face, but he didn't have time to pay the boy any mind.

The figure was gone by now. Either it went down some alleyway while Orphen was blinking, or the whole thing had just been a daydream of his. There was no way for him to tell right now.

In any case, he couldn't just stand here. Orphen turned to Majic and quickly told him, "Listen, there's something I have to do. I gotta go."

"Huh...?" Majic asked blankly. "Where are you going?"

"I don't really know. Just go back to the inn, okay?"

"What? Well, when are you coming back—Master!"

As Majic yelled in protest, Orphen ran off.

He arrived at the place where he thought he'd seen the person, but all he found was a narrow alleyway. There weren't any shop entrances or places to hide. The alley stretched back a few meters and then turned at a right angle. It looked only barely big enough for a person to pass through, but as long as Orphen could trust his eyes, the person could have only gone this way.

Orphen entered the alley and hurried down it as fast as he could. He kicked aside the junk lying on the ground as he pressed forward. He clucked his tongue in annoyance—he could manage the tightness of the space, but it irritated him

to have such a narrow field of view.

He turned a few times and emerged on another street—but no matter where he looked, he couldn't spot that familiar face. There was a park just in front of him when he left the alley, though. Orphen peered into it, thinking that was probably where he'd lost sight of the person, but the park was deserted, save for some scattered benches here and there.

"Did I have the wrong person...?" Orphen finally muttered to himself. He continued silently, *Now that I think about it, it'd be weird for him to run from me anyway.*

He turned around, putting the park behind him, but then stopped curiously. Peeking back over his shoulder, he noticed a bench hidden in the shade of a tree, and on it, a man that caught his eye.

Maybe it was the man's blond hair that caught his eye, or maybe it was the worn out suit he was wearing that didn't match his handsome looks. But what drew his eye more than anything else was the expression on the man's face. He had his face pointed upward and was just mindlessly gazing at the sky. No, "mindless" wasn't right. There was a distinct expression on the man's face. It was like a cracked glass...despair, maybe.

The man's neck was bent as he looked up at the sky, his Adam's apple completely motionless. Orphen sighed and looked away from him.

I dunno... A man in despair on a park bench...? Does stuff like this happen because of the season? He smiled bittersweetly as he thought. *I might have had the same expression on my face...*

Orphen shrugged and began to head back. As he did so, he felt a dry wind blow through the street he'd turned his back on.



As he looked up at the sky, he frowned. He glanced down and stared at the young man in black who was ducking into an alley across the street from him.

"Hmm... Where have I seen him before?" he asked himself.

He'd felt a switch flip in his memories, but his actual connection to the young

man was still foggy to him. He was fairly certain he recognized the man, but he couldn't remember where he knew him from.

"Hmm... Is there any point in finding out?"

He stood up as he watched the alley the man had disappeared into. He wasn't particularly bothered by the dust, but he gave his knees two or three pats to clean them off. He didn't really feel like he was standing if he didn't do this.

"Well, I've got time."

He said the words aloud—though there was no one nearby, he didn't doubt that someone had heard him—and Helpart slowly strolled out of the park.



"Sword training school?" Claiomh asked as she looked up at the building. She suddenly became aware of just how vacant she sounded and shut her mouth. There was no reason to repeat the words back; at the entrance, there was a sign that was quite impossible to misread, clearly identifying the place as just that: a sword training school.

The building was an old-fashioned dojo, a rare sight nowadays when fancy sports clubs and entertainment centers had become commonplace in big cities. An extremely simple square building. From inside, she could hear vigorous shouts and the sounds of swords clashing together.

"Indeed it is," Ryan said nonchalantly, the trainee still limp in his arms. "The best sword training school in Nashwater—commonly called the Sinkhole."

"That part was a lie, wasn't it?"

"Yes," he admitted readily.

Claiomh decided to ignore that and looked back at the dojo again. It seemed well maintained, but the walls were aging, the windows were small, and it didn't look like it got a lot of sun. When the rest of Nashwater was covered in flowers, the building stood out all the more. Though the dojo wasn't on the main street, but on a back street far from it, where there were rows of dilapidated buildings.

"But..." Claiomh lifted up the feet of the trainee she was holding. Leki had

come down from her head and was curled up on the trainee's stomach. "The best'? Are there that many sword dojos in this town?"

"Nope. There's two." Once again, Ryan declared the fact with the utmost confidence. "You saw them earlier. The other dojo is run by that guy named Ed. They're a real thorn in our side, let me tell you."

"Well, aren't you weaker than them?"

"Everyone does say that," he said rather nonchalantly. Then his eyes sparkled. Those narrow, unreliable eyes. "However! We have Lottecia!" As he spoke, he raised his arms and clenched his fists, so naturally, the trainee he was holding fell to the ground head-first. Leki jumped off of him, surprised. Yet Ryan just kept going without a care. "And so, I plan on living an easy life from here on out, relying completely on her just as I always have."

"I'm not really sure what to say to that..." Claiomh narrowed her eyes at the prideful expression on Ryan's face. "And anyway, who's this Lottecia person?"

"Well, basically, our instructor, or something like that?" Ryan smiled, picking up the trainee he'd dropped. Claiomh realized he looked younger when he smiled—maybe around the same age as her?

When he realized that she wasn't saying anything, he winked at her (which really didn't suit him) and said, "Her skills are amazing. She's a natural born swordswoman. If you'd like to get stronger, maybe you should ask her for some pointers."

"Huh..." Claiomh said vaguely. Then she realized what he'd said and frowned. "What do you mean, 'get stronger'? Did I say anything like that?"

"Hm?" Ryan said like he hadn't expected her to say that. "That's what it looked like to me. Well, no matter."

He cut the conversation short there and headed for the entrance to the dojo. Claiomh, pulled along, followed after him. The door was wide, since a decent number of people used the building. Of course, it still wasn't really built for carrying an unconscious person through it.

The inside of the building looked much like the outside of it. Good maintenance disguised its age and the damage to the walls. Through the

entryway, where pressed flowers hung in mounted frames, there was a door with a bathroom sign on it, and past that, a large hall, where several boys and girls in athletic clothes were vigorously practicing with wooden swords.

The wooden floor was scuffed and scratched from countless shoes kicking, scraping, and grinding it down. Most of the trainees were young. Finding herself surprised by that for some reason, Claiomh realized that it had been a long time since she'd spoken to people her own age.

Well, it's not like Orphen and Majic are all that older than me... she pointed out to herself. *Why are they all so young, though? I'd think a dojo in a town like this would have more senior students... Is it just not popular?*

She watched them practice. None of them seemed to be fooling around, and she was honestly impressed by their vigor and technique as they practiced their moves. She admitted that she probably wouldn't be able to score a single point against any of them in a match. Still, she was acquainted with a person who boasted overwhelming strength, so she wasn't amazed watching them or anything.

She counted seven trainees currently practicing, two of whom were girls several years younger than her.

I wonder why they're not in school—not that I can really talk. She averted her eyes even though she was only talking to herself.

"Ryan?" One of the trainees noticed them and stopped his sword mid-swing. The rest of them followed suit at the sound of the first student's voice.

Claiomh reflexively shrunk back, but their focus wasn't on her.

"What happened? Is that...Alan? Is he hurt?!"

They were all looking at the trainee the pair had carried here.

They put their swords down and gathered around, and Ryan gave them a confident smile. Actually, he had his back to Claiomh, so she couldn't see it, but his whole body seemed to be giving off that sort of air.

"Worry not. This happens often, does it not? Oh, and don't worry about Ed. I gave him a stern talking-to."

“You what?!” One of the trainees, the oldest looking one (aside from Ryan) flushed with anger. He was the solidly-built, sporty type, all hard lines and sharp angles.

“The rumors were true, then? It was them? Dammit, this is the third one!” Another man groaned with irritation, and then like ripples, other angry voices came from the group.

“We can’t just let them get away with this anymore! And why won’t Lottecia...”

“She says not to pick a fight with them—”

“Yeah, ’cause she doesn’t think we can win. Sure, Ed was trained by the military, but the other guys are just his lackeys, right?”

“Hmph. There’s probably another reason she won’t do anything about Ed—”

Claiomh looked between the shouting trainees with some amount of distress. She didn’t think it was her place to butt in, and she couldn’t very well introduce herself like this. She decided to just shoot an irritated look at Ryan, who hadn’t introduced her, and wait until their anger subsided. Of course, she had no way of knowing whether that would be a matter of minutes or hours.

The latter was starting to seem more likely. As Claiomh listened to their seemingly endless anger, she was just about to give up when one voice cut through the shouting mob.

“If you’re going to criticize someone, you could do it to their face.” The voice was like a needle going through cotton. Cotton, especially if it was particularly thick, was difficult to pierce with a needle. The clamoring trainees all immediately held their tongues.

“Ah.” The only voice that didn’t stop in time was Ryan’s buffoonish one. “Lottecia.”

This time, the trainees’ eyes all focused in the direction opposite the door Claiomh had come in from. A door leading deeper into the building had opened, and in it stood a slender figure.

“Lottecia?” Claiomh repeated the name in a question that she was sure no

one would answer. But she was too preoccupied with staring in surprise at the figure to let that bother her.

From her experience training with the sword, she had assumed that the Goddess of the Sword would be a dignified woman several decades older than her. She realized that was only her own image of the woman, but nothing had ever contradicted it, so it had been set firmly in her mind. But the Goddess of the Sword all the trainees were focused on could only have been a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old girl. She looked about the same age as Claiomh.

She wasn't very tall, but she looked even smaller because her shoulders were very narrow. She didn't look for a second like a person learning swordsmanship. Her black hair was short, not going past the nape of her neck, and it curled in a few random places. Claiomh supposed you might be able to interpret her lack of care for that aspect of her appearance as her being an athletically-inclined person. But that was really the only thing suggesting she was a competitive swordsman.

Lottecia, the Goddess of the Sword, folded her arms in her comfortable-looking athletic wear and frowned in annoyance.

"So? What is it you want to do? Charge into their dojo with wooden swords and beat them up? Maybe set fire to the place as you leave? Then when the cops round up the lot of you, you'll all say, 'Instructor Lottecia put us up to it,' won't you?"

Claiomh suddenly realized that her eyes had met with Lottecia's.

The woman smiled bitterly. "This is disgraceful, and we're in front of a guest too..." When she threw up her hands, everyone finally turned to focus on Claiomh.

Are they really only noticing me now? Claiomh furrowed her brow and gave a little nod to the trainees who had turned toward her. Maybe it was more like they'd noticed her but hadn't bothered asking who she was.

"Well, for now..." She gulped under the gaze of those around her. "I think it'd be better if we put this kid down somewhere." Claiomh was still carrying the unconscious trainee.

Lottecia Crewbstar—when Claiomh heard that name, she basically just thought it was long and hard to pronounce (not that she had any room to complain on that front, really).

As if she was used to hearing that, or maybe because she'd read Claiomh's mind, Lottecia chuckled after introducing herself and added, "Please call me Lotte. Not that too many people actually call me that."

"Lotte." Claiomh tried the name out as if to see how easy it was on the tongue. She nodded, petting Leki where he rested on her lap. "Okay. I like that."

"Thanks."

They were in a reception room behind the training hall. Though there wasn't any ostentation to the room, so maybe it would be better to call it a break room. The room would have been cramped with five people in it, but thankfully there were only four there now. One was the injured trainee, resting on one of the couches, then there was Lottecia and Claiomh...and Ryan.

Claiomh had been directed to sit on the cleanest of the couches. This one was apparently for guests. On the last one sat Lottecia and Ryan. It looked like there was another room in the back, but the door was closed.

When she got another look at her, Lottecia seemed rather well-mannered in the way she sat. Her straight posture may have indicated a level of training that her outward appearance otherwise didn't suggest. She looked Claiomh straight on and quietly bowed her head.

"First, please let me thank you. It seems you saved Alan from a rather dangerous fate."

"Oh, I didn't really do anything," Claiomh hurriedly denied it. She explained that she had actually been in danger, and that she felt somewhat indebted to Ryan for taking her place in the situation.

"Err, I was just passing by, and I heard shouting, so I went to look...and the rest just kind of happened..."

"But—" Lottecia raised her head and frowned, a somewhat accusatory tone in her voice. "You really were in a lot of danger, weren't you?"

“It...seems like it, yes,” she said, imagining the face of the man with the scar on his lip.

Really, she could have just asked Leki for his help, so it wasn't like she was in total peril, but it was true that it was rather careless of her to step into a situation she didn't have an easy escape from. Orphen would probably have been even angrier with her if he'd heard, Claiomh thought with a deep sigh.

Lottecia must have interpreted it as a sigh of annoyance at her criticism, however. Her tone grew fiercer, since she thought she had to be stricter with her warning. “The first person from this dojo who was attacked was a girl. She was around the same age as you too. She won't even look at me anymore...”

“...”

“Claiomh, you probably don't know this, since it seems like you're not from around here, but those guys will do *anything* to get what they want. I didn't believe it at first when I heard they'd even assaulted a cop, but...”

“...”

Claiomh's silence wasn't just because she'd heard how grave the situation really was. She was also busy recalling the earlier indignation of the trainees.

Lottecia was in full-on lecture mode. In a scolding tone, she told Claiomh, “So if something like that happens again, you can't go anywhere near them. Keep yourself safe—”

“It's like they own the place, then!” Claiomh exclaimed without thinking.

Now it was Lottecia's turn to go quiet.

Crap, Claiomh thought as the other woman looked at her in surprise. She glanced over at Ryan, but he was looking away like the conversation had nothing to do with him.

Clucking her tongue reflexively, Claiomh looked back to Lottecia. “I think I get why your students were so angry before. I'm sure you've got your reasons, but if you leave them be, is somebody gonna do something about them?”

“The police are watching them, of course.” There was clear frustration on Lottecia's face. Her mouth twitched, revealing a sharp canine. “Which means

there's nothing we can do, right? It's like I said before. Do you think we should raid them or something? We'd be just like them, then."

"Well, I..." Claiomh shut her mouth, finding herself unable to finish the sentence with, *just raided the base of a hot spring gang two weeks ago*. She pressed down on Leki's back as he rested, curled up on her lap. She listened to Lottecia's whispered words.

"My father didn't want anyone carrying out vigilante justice or fighting duels."

"Your father?"

"The former head here. He was a true master of the blade." She gave the fantastical descriptor with the same bland tone she might use to state, "I'm a woman," and Claiomh almost missed it. Lottecia had used the past tense. Claiomh felt a pang of sympathy as the face of her own father, who'd died young, went through her mind. However...

"'Master'?" Claiomh asked. She knew what it meant. Lottecia's father had likely been a very skilled competitive swordsman, but... "Could he really have been that great when so many of his students have gotten the crap kicked out of them?"

"Don't insult my father!" Lottecia shouted, but Claiomh didn't intend to back down.

"I don't mean to speak ill of your late father, but even if they were his words originally, you're the one saying them now, so doesn't that make them your words?"

"Kh..." Lottecia flushed, at a loss for words. For the first time, she looked her age.

Claiomh clenched her jaw as she watched the other girl. She'd started to argue on impulse, but she didn't intend to stop. That being said, she wasn't quite sure what to do next. And while she was hesitating, Ryan cut in.

"How should I say this..."

Claiomh hurriedly looked at Ryan. She'd almost forgotten he was even there. Lottecia raised her eyebrows at his bad manners, but he continued on without

reacting to either of them.

“You get awfully angry about things that don’t really involve you, don’t you?”

“Huh...?” It took Claiomh a moment to realize that he was talking about her. She searched for something to say back to him, but he was faster.

With a smirk, he said, “But everyone has their own circumstances...”

“Ryan!” Lottecia yelled even louder.

Ryan just shut his mouth, not looking the least bit surprised, as if he’d been expecting that reaction.

Still, the heat seemed to dissipate from Lottecia at the same time. When she looked back at Claiomh, all the rage and impulsiveness was gone from her eyes. Only politeness was left.

“I’m sorry for losing my composure... I should have been more thankful to you, considering what you did.”

“I’m sorry too.” Claiomh hung her head awkwardly. She didn’t know why exactly, but she’d hurt Lottecia. The other girl’s lips were trembling slightly.

Lottecia shook her head. “Just like Ryan said, we have our circumstances. I can’t elaborate further, though. I don’t want to burden you with them. So, please...don’t involve yourself any more than you already have.”

Claiomh didn’t respond. Rather, she tried to, but another voice beat her to the punch.

“Waaa ha ha ha ha ha!” Familiar laughter was coming through the door to the practice room. “Waaa ha ha ha ha ha! My pupil! Is my pupil here?!”

“Ahh!” Ryan leapt up. Beside him, Lottecia had a hand to her temple. Ignoring her irritation, he leapt over to the door and pushed it open.

Claiomh craned her neck to see who would appear there, but it was exactly who she was expecting. And she was not happy about being right.

From the door to the practice room, two dwarves wearing fur cloaks, standing at about 130 centimeters tall, strode inside. One had unruly hair, wore a sword, and was laughing pointlessly loudly. In his shadow (in more ways than one) hid

the other dwarf; this one glanced around nervously, his face obscured by thick glasses.

All the trainees in the practice room were focused intently on their training, their backs to the dwarves, almost like they were doing everything they possibly could to ignore them as the dwarves strode through them.

Spotting Ryan, the dwarf with the sword grinned, his eyes sparkling. “Ahh, my pupil!”

“Master!” Ryan greeted the dwarves enthusiastically. He ran up to the one who was standing with his arms crossed and his legs wide and fell to one knee, lowering his head. “I am glad to see you well. I humbly ask to receive your teachings once more today.”

The dwarf replied to Ryan with a similar air of importance. “Very good. Have you mastered the special technique I taught you the day before yesterday?”



Ryan looked up. Claiomh couldn't see his expression from where she sat, but she saw him clench his fist and shake his head. "No, Master... I'm afraid the Secret Skill: Apeman Slaughter you entrusted to me was defeated in a mere instant."

"What? Again?! Hrmm... There sure are some fearsome swordsmen out there in the wild... In that case, I shall teach you a new special technique, the High King's Bone Marrow Precipitation, so ready yourself!"

"Yes, sir!"

"...What are you two up to?"

"Ack?!" The two dwarves—Volkan and Dortin—exclaimed at Claiomh's muttered question.

The one with the sword, meaning Volkan, pointed a short finger her way and said, flustered, "P...Pupil, what are these...dregs of the devil doing here?!"

"Does it go against your principles to remember people's names or something?" Claiomh asked, eyes narrowed, as she walked over to the door. She put Leki on her head and her hand on her hip and chose the first thing that came to mind of the many things she wanted to say. "...Pupil?"

She looked between Ryan, who was still on one knee, and the dwarves, who were still frozen, looking her way. But the dwarves didn't remain frozen for long. Swinging his arms under his cloak, Volkan looked up at Claiomh defiantly.

"Hmph! Isn't it obvious?!" Taking some sort of pose, he said, "One week ago...I snuck into this dojo for a just cause..."

"He was hungry, so he was looking for some food," the other dwarf, Dortin, added in a whisper.

Paying him no mind, Volkan went on. He pointed at Ryan. "But this man stood in the way of the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the Great Vulcano Volkan!"

"I guess he was on night guard duty."

"Our destined showdown took place... It was the fiercest of fierce bouts, but it ended in an instant!"

“He was sneaking in through the window, but hearing someone shout surprised him, and he fell...”

“Thus, something that only true swordsmen could understand blossomed between us during our battle, which made us master and pupil!”

“Well, I don’t really get it, but I guess they’re on the same wavelength... I guess it’s fine with me though, since we get to eat if my brother comes and teaches him special moves or whatever.”

“I guess I get it... Except for the part where you guys are the master and Ryan’s the pupil,” Claiomh remarked, scratching her nose.

“Oh, well, there’s a bit after my brother fell from the window...” Dartin stated matter-of-factly. There was a deep tone of resignation in his voice. “There happened to be a stray cat right where my brother fell, and that cat got surprised and took this guy out.”

“...Yeah, that’s not really better.”

“And why are you talking to *him* over *me* all of a sudden?!” Volkan shouted.

Claiomh ignored him and turned to Ryan. The young man hadn’t changed positions this whole time, but had at least turned his head her way. All the students who had been furiously ignoring the dwarves up until now were taking a break from their training and watching her from afar as well.

As Ryan looked up at her, completely composed, Claiomh sighed and said, “In the first place, is there even anything to get out of learning swordsmanship from these two?”

She saw all the trainees nod in agreement at once, but...

“What?!” Ryan alone had a shocked look on his face, like he’d been asked something completely unexpected. “But this gentleman took eighty-seven special sword moves of mine the day before yesterday and didn’t sustain a bit of damage! If he is not supremely powerful, then what is he?!”

“If you ask me, it proves he’s pretty darn weak if he took eighty-seven hits and couldn’t do a thing about it.”

“What?! Is that true?!”

“Ahh...” A voice came from behind them. Claiomh looked over her shoulder and found Lottecia looking their way.

There was a shade of fatigue in her expression, but she seemed patient enough to bear it at the same time. As Ryan trembled in shock, she gave him an order.

“Ryan, I think that’s enough from you. Why don’t you go outside? You’re on cleaning duty today, right? You can take those two out to eat somewhere while you’re at it. Why don’t you do that?”

“Ha ha! You almost said that in a way that sort of seems like you might just be trying to get rid of us, but yes, I’ll do so.”

“Very well. The butcher over there was having a sale on steak, my pupil.”

“Yay! I thought I’d never get to eat meat sold at an actual store for the rest of my life!”

After the dwarves had been sent elsewhere (Ryan included), Claiomh sighed. She looked up in surprise when she heard the sound of two sighs at once and discovered Lottecia giving her the same surprised look. It seemed they’d both sighed at once.

Claiomh couldn’t help chuckling.

Nobody had told them to, but the trainees all went back to practicing as well.

Lottecia silently held out her hand to Claiomh. Claiomh didn’t know what it meant really, but she gripped Lottecia’s hand lightly and made up her mind.

Chapter III: Meeting of the Sword

Yeah, she's not winning this. He could tell at a glance. There shouldn't have been such a huge difference between them that it was obvious from a single glance, but... *There's no difference in their stamina. They're both determined and decisive, but the difference in their skills is too great.*

They'd stopped swinging their wooden swords in big arcs and were instead exchanging quick, sharp attacks now. It was immediately obvious that Claiomh was slower. There was also a clear difference in the amount of practice they'd had, but Claiomh was using sheer willpower to increase the number of her attacks. However, the number of *viable* attacks—ones her opponent would actually have to defend against—were decreasing. She brought her sword down, swung it, whipped it up, thrust it, but the black-haired girl met Claiomh's frenzied assault with only a few parries, almost careless in their execution.

Lottecia. Orphen pondered the name. There were older students in the dojo, but her movements stood out from the rest.

Orphen looked up at Leki—Claiomh had placed the dragon on his head so that she could move more easily and asked, "Do you get this stuff?"

Naturally, the baby Deep Dragon was not particularly interested in the subject. He remained sleeping, his nose pressed to his stomach (not that Orphen could see him on the top of his head).

He probably didn't, Orphen thought to himself with a wry smile. Dragons, who were born with incredible sorcerous power and the ability to control that power, probably couldn't understand this. Dragons with mighty builds and steel wills, who represented the terrible power of nature and benefited from its protection.

Having none of those things, what humans needed was a method to turn their weakness to strength. They had to make up for their lack of power with wisdom and the use of tools. Among their many inventions were weapons and the methods to wield them.

Of weapons, the sword was probably the most popular. As Orphen watched the two girls swinging wooden swords at each other in the practice room while the other students trained around them, he thought back to the past. Not that he had trained all that diligently in the sword anyway.

Still, he could tell. Lottecia was concentrated completely on blocking Claiomh's blows. Normally, a situation like this could only go on for a few seconds before the attacker prevailed—after all, it's not possible to defend forever. But Claiomh's sword had failed to reach its target for almost two minutes now.

"Yah!" Claiomh thrust out her sword with a quick shout.

Lottecia didn't move—no, she just moved so slightly it was almost imperceptible, but she was making sure to always maintain a superior position. And as she did, she effortlessly parried all of the jabs coming her way. Claiomh probably didn't realize this, but every time her sword was deflected, it narrowed the range of her next attack, making it easy for Lottecia to predict her next move.

Orphen didn't know if this was natural talent or the product of training, but... *Her eyesight's ridiculously good. Reflexes are fast too. Before her opponent can build up strength, she predicts their next move and goes after them. That must be why she's dominating the fight even without really using any force...*

She wasn't defending. And she wasn't attacking, but she was clearly on the offensive.

What would happen if she actually attacked? The moment he thought that, a change occurred.

Thwack! Claiomh stepped forward, swinging her sword sideways, and Lottecia's sword intercepted it. Pushed back after stepping forward, Claiomh was stuck. In the next instant...

By the time Claiomh got her sword back up and was ready to move, her opponent was no longer in front of her.

"Huh...?" Orphen heard her voice at the same time.

"Aaaaah!" With a scream, Claiomh's body spun around. Her blonde hair

fanned out like wings as she crashed to the floor. Orphen felt the impact through the wooden floor under his feet.

“That would happen...” he muttered to himself.

Lottecia stood behind Claiomh. She was holding her wooden sword with both hands and smiling faintly. She hadn’t done anything all that impressive—she’d just gotten around into Claiomh’s blind spot in a split second and tripped Claiomh with her sword when the other girl tried to step forward. Claiomh’s spectacular fall was probably because she was already out of breath and it was easier to knock her off balance. Still, it was a rather high-level technique that you didn’t typically see too often.

As Claiomh used her sword like a cane to pull herself back up, Lottecia held out a hand to her. Claiomh groaned as she took it. “Oww...”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

“Ugh... Yeah, I’m not hurt or anything.”

“I guess I got a little carried away. You were really aggressive, though.”

Well, if your opponent has that many openings, it makes you want to try out all sorts of weird moves, Orphen thought as he watched them. He could recall feeling the same thing in the past.

“So...” Orphen looked down at his feet. Two dwarves were lying there, one on top of the other, acting as a footrest for him. “What the hell are you two doing here?” he asked them.

Volkan raised his beat-up face. “You can’t just make casual conversation with us like this, you squinty-eyed sorcerer!” the dwarf shouted as he flailed his arms and legs (of course, with Orphen pressing down on him with his feet, he couldn’t move otherwise). “Are you that mad that I took on a legitimate pupil and am super respected by him, you whiner?! If you don’t get those feet off of me and free me, I’ll kill you by pulling out all the cotton in your pillow!”

Dortin underneath him didn’t even seem to have the will to move anymore. He was completely limp, tears streaming from his eyes.

Orphen ignored them and just said, “Well, I know if I ask, I’ll just get some

stupid answer back, so let's not worry about that..."

"If you're not worried about it, then move your feet! Are you listening?! I'm giving you ten seconds!"

"Is Majic really serious...?"

The boy in question was in another corner of the dojo, getting chased around by a kid who looked to be about ten and whacked with a wooden sword.

Following him with his eyes, Orphen muttered, "I sorta knew this already, but seeing it with my own eyes just sucks all the energy out of me..."

"I'm gonna count down, okay?! Nine, eight, seven, six... Hey, you're not even listening! Just so you know, when I get down to zero, I'm gonna awaken and gain my true power, okay?! When that happens, a lot of stuff's gonna be, like, ten times better! Are you ready for that?!"

"So, what does a professional think of our Goddess of the Sword?" A man with light blond hair had approached Orphen at some point. He was wearing a strange outfit consisting of green tights, but he must have been a trainee here.

"My pupil!" Volkan was shouting something under his feet, but Orphen ignored him.

"I'm not a professional... What gave you that impression?"

"You just looked that way to me," the man—Ryan, Orphen thought his name was—said with a peculiar air about him. He looked down then and suddenly seemed to notice Volkan and Dortin. "By the way, Master, why on earth did you crawl under someone's feet like that?"

"Ugh...!" Volkan stopped flailing and shouting. "You see, it pays to attack from directions your enemy isn't expecting in battle, my pupil. That is the essence of this special technique. Have you learned it?"

"Don't do that, Brother! Just admit that you need help— Gh!" Dortin tried to convince Volkan before his brother squished him from above to shut him up.

"So," Volkan went on. "I'll be training here. Keep it up yourself as well."

"Oh! Endlessly diligent as always, Master!"

“Err...” Orphen sighed and looked up at Ryan again. The swordsman seemed to be honestly impressed. “Oh, whatever. So she’s the Goddess of the Sword?” he asked.

Ryan nodded, indicating Lottecia. He closed his eyes and raised one hand in an affected way. “Yes. No other competitor can match her.”

“Competitive swordsmanship, eh...? You don’t hear about that too much these days.”

“True. Well, there’s no reason for it to be popular.”

By “competitive swordsmanship,” they meant that they only learned it in order to compete against one another. It was only slightly different from actual combat training, and there wasn’t really a reason for people to prefer a sport to the real thing. In fact, Orphen had never seen a dojo like this before. Though he’d been in a similar place quite often, since the Tower’s curriculum included weapons training.

He wasn’t sure what the actual difference was, per se. If he had to hazard a guess, maybe it was the importance of it to their lives. Sorcerers were always facing threats—though the greatest one was their own sorcery—so each aspect of their training was necessary for them to protect themselves. If they were lacking in any way, they would be eliminated. And if they didn’t want to be eliminated, they had to do everything in their power to control and train themselves. In a way, a sorcerer’s whole life was training, and they didn’t have a choice in the matter.

But... Orphen looked around the practice room and narrowed his eyes. The trainees swinging around wooden swords here had lives outside of this dojo. They enjoyed their training here just like they enjoyed the rest of their lives. If anything, they were probably the normal ones, but...

“I know exactly what you’re thinking,” Ryan said.

Pulled from his reverie, Orphen looked up at the man. He didn’t have time to think of something to say before Ryan put on an affected smile and continued.

“But Lottecia might actually be more like you.”

“You might be right,” Orphen quietly agreed.

He looked back and found that Claiomh had stood and caught her breath, and was now lunging at Lottecia with a wooden sword once more. He couldn't imagine the outcome would be any different this time, but...in any case...

Lottecia didn't particularly seem to be enjoying herself as she held her sword.

"So, what did you think, Orphen?" Claiomh asked, cocking her head.

"Hmm..." was all Orphen said in response.

Claiomh was looking up rather cheerfully at him despite the scrapes all over her (meaning she was knocked around pretty thoroughly). They were walking back from the dojo, down a gently sloping hill.

Her furry hat had his limbs stretched out atop her head. Orphen looked up at the baby dragon instead of her as he responded.

"I'm not sure what to say. It seems like a normal dojo?"

"Well, yeah..." Apparently that wasn't the answer Claiomh had been hoping for. She pursed her lips, making an expression like a pebble had come flying at her. Looking back at Majic, who was walking slightly behind them, she asked, "What about you, Majic?"

"I dunno what to say..." Majic looked truly beaten up. He was walking funny too, like his whole body hurt. "I'm in a lot of pain, except for the places that are numb. It was really terrible... I bet that kid's a real genius, the type that only comes around once every ten years."

"You're just too slow," Claiomh told him bluntly.

Orphen looked over his shoulder at his apprentice and said, "You should attend for a while—with Claiomh."

"Huh?!" Majic exclaimed with all the dissatisfaction he could muster.

But there was a cheer at the same time—Claiomh clasped her hands in front of her chest and asked, "Really?!" with her eyes sparkling.

She'd practically leaped into the air, throwing Leki off balance, so he scrambled to right himself on her head. Claiomh reached up with one hand to help him, then continued making a racket.

“So you understood what I meant, Orphen!”

“Hmm... I wouldn't say that, exactly...” Orphen scratched his head and lowered his eyelids a bit. He had a strange feeling... Something about this didn't sit right with him. “I mean, that competitive swordsman who attacked you yesterday... Was it Ed? We don't know a thing about him.”

“Well, we can't just leave them alone!”

“I understand how you feel but...it was Lottecia, right? She said she didn't want you getting involved for some reason, right? Don't you think this isn't any of our business?”

“That's not true!” Claiomh stated with absolute confidence, though Orphen had no idea where she was getting it. She clenched her fist like she had not a shred of doubt in her, and Orphen watched her with a groan.

He felt bad for thinking this, but he couldn't help feeling like the more confident she was, the more doubtful everyone around her had to be of her. He didn't put that thought into words, but Claiomh must have sensed it anyway and hastily explained herself.

She leaned forward in a begging pose. “I mean, I'm just being virtuous, aren't I? There's no way such pure feelings could lead to something bad. Don't you think so? I think love solves all problems!”

“I think you're making a great case for that thing about the road to hell being paved with good intentions.”

“That's not very nice! You think I'm on my way to hell?” Claiomh strode forward, her pleading look changed to righteous anger.

“I just think you're being a busybody.” Orphen shrugged. When Claiomh stopped and puffed her cheeks out in indignation, he took the opportunity to add, “You're basically saying you want me to be a bodyguard for that dojo, right? And not only is it unpaid work, but it's not even something they want us doing. The money's not a huge deal since we've got some financial leeway right now, but it doesn't sit right with me to do it when they don't want us to.”

“Hmm...” Even Claiomh had to back off at that. She frowned, thinking for a bit before saying, “Well, then...” She snapped like she had a good idea. “What if

you leave Lottecia alone and just crash that Ed guy's dojo and make a scene there? Then it's just you launching an attack on your own and it won't cause any problems for her."

"What about the problems it'll cause for me?!" Orphen waved his arms and shouted.

Claiomh's only response was a disgruntled, "Whaaat?"

"Isn't that basically what you did in Kimluck?"

"W-Well, maybe, but it's not like I had any choice about it..."

"Umm..." Majic, who had been silent throughout their exchange thus far, piped up quietly. "I'm not sure I really get what's going on, but how about while Claiomh and I attend that dojo for a bit, you investigate, you know, what's going on in the background here, Master? If you find that there's no need for us to do anything, then that's fine, and if you find otherwise, we can come up with what to do then... We still don't really have our next destination figured out, so we'll be staying here for a while anyway, right? This is probably better than having nothing to do..."

"I guess that makes the most sense..." What actually made the most sense was getting out of this town and moving on, but he decided not to think about that. If they did that, they'd have to choose their destination, after all. And Claiomh probably wouldn't agree, besides.

"Besides..." A combative fire seemed to burn in Majic's eyes as he muttered, "...even if that kid is a one-in-a-century genius swordsman, I can't just keep losing to him..."

"I told you it's just that you're slow," Claiomh told him coldly.

Orphen eyed the two of them and nodded resignedly. "Well, there's nothing wrong with the two of you learning how to use a sword, and having a specialist supervising you'll be good experience. I've got nothing against the two of you attending that dojo for a while. And I guess it won't be too hard to just look into this Ed guy while I'm at it."

"While you're at what?" Claiomh didn't overlook his slip of the tongue.

“Yeah... I saw someone in town I was curious about yesterday. I tried to go after him, but I lost him. Might’ve just been seeing things, though...”

“Who was it?”

It would have been easy enough to tell them, but Orphen hesitated. The name probably wouldn’t mean anything to the two of them. But more than that, Orphen just didn’t want to say it.

“Well...” he stalled as he searched for the right words in his head. He smiled wryly when he realized he was trying to be vague about it.

Putting his hand on his chin, he smiled faintly and told them, “Let’s call him an unexpected storm.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The storm has no ill will, and the rain is actually necessary to the land, but it’s still a pain when it happens... That sorta guy.”

“What is my purpose? Is that what you asked, Krylancelo?” The man always spoke like that—words sharp, tone like he was far above you, at a distance. “A foolish question, wouldn’t you say? You are the only person who has ever asked that of me.”

He indicated the left side of his chest with his thumb. His heart was there, underneath the black robe he wore. “I follow my will. The will that dwells right here. I need no one else. The only reason that I am with someone, that I am here, is because my will deems it necessary. If it becomes unnecessary, I will no doubt disappear from sight...”

People got the wrong idea about him, but the man wasn’t arrogant. In fact, he desired to train himself more than anyone.

Yes, a strong desire. He traveled about, seeking all sorts of things. He likely still did so now. That would likely never change. He would continue to wander, continue to appear all over. Seeking all sorts of things, and obtaining them if he so desired to. An extremely troublesome visitor.

He blew through, trampling whatever was in his path, sucking up everything

that interested him, and once he had no reason to be there anymore, he left. Disappearing from sight...

That night, as Orphen lay in bed at the inn, he rolled over for the umpteenth time and looked up at the ceiling.

“That sorta guy,” he muttered to himself.



“Oho... Well, this is trouble. I didn’t think anyone would try to contact me,” Helpart said, astonished, in the dark of the night, and the even blacker dark of his mind.

Unflinching darkness surrounded him, and everything was still, like the surface of a lake.

“And while I sleep, defenseless. Did you just trace me through the network? If you have the ability to manage the network yourself, why go to the risk of being detected by me? Taking a bit of a risk, no? Do you wish to compete with me?”

There was no answer. No clear answer, anyway. But he knew what his conversation partner was saying, and he had no doubt that the opposite was true as well.

“That’s right... As long as the world remains connected, there is no superiority when it comes to the network’s functions. You’re clever. Oh? You don’t like flattery? Don’t be that way. I’m always itching to give people compliments. Gofers are all like that, don’t you think?” He smirked.

Helpart wished he knew whether the other person was smiling as well. He’d just told one of his favorite jokes. But a response came quickly.

“What, that wasn’t funny? Hmph, young people don’t know anything. Alright, then. If you went out of your way to make your presence known by contacting me, I’m sure you have some business with me. Let’s hear what it is. I’m probably sleeping on the side of the road right now. I don’t want my wallet getting stolen. There’s pictures of my family in there.”

The next response came just as quickly.

“Krylancelo...? That’s the name of the guy I’m watching? His information... He fled the Tower of Fangs five years ago... Goes by Orphen now... His assassination skills mark him as a Sorcerous Stabber. I see. I thought the face looked familiar. Quite a dangerous person, he is. Well, now I’m interested. Why would you send me that information? Who are you...?”

“Who are you?” He awoke at his own words.

Helpart slowly opened his eyes. He was leaning against a wall. He had likely only drifted off for a moment. Otherwise he would have found himself collapsed on the ground.

He looked up at a darkened inn window and smiled wryly to himself. His guard had been down completely.

It hurt his pride, but... *It was worth something.*

When he was contacted while he was sleeping, there was a chance upon waking that he’d forget everything that had been said, but he seemed to have cleared that hurdle.

Of course, this time, it was possible that he was being deceived, but...someone was trying to use him. Him, of all people.

But he was sure he could make up for it later.

“Well, no matter. First, I’ll have to make use of the information I’ve gained,” he muttered to himself as he picked himself up off of the alley wall.

Chapter IV: Legend of the Sword

“Now, then,” Orphen said to himself, folding his arms as he stood at the entrance to the park.

It was another day of fine weather, sunlight shining down on the earth, though not too much of it. There was no wind, and the town was quiet underneath the fuzzy outline of the sun. The only sound was the indistinct shuffle of people’s feet on the pavement.

Orphen looked around and confirmed to himself, “This is where I lost him.”

Of course, this was two days ago now. Barring a huge coincidence, it was very unlikely that he’d see the same person again in the same place; however...this was the only thing he had to go on.

He held the walking map he’d bought at the inn in his hand and cocked his head as he looked at it. The map also acted as a pamphlet, showing every small street in detail and listing the various parks and facilities that could be found around town.

Gazing down at the colorful map, Orphen muttered to himself, “Is this just a coincidence...?”

Claiomh had told him that this town had two sword training schools. Other than Lottecia Crewbstar’s dojo, which he’d gone to yesterday, there was one more dojo near this park. It was two blocks away, not quite close enough to be *too* close.

Should I take care of this first?

This was another task he didn’t have any particular leads on. If he didn’t find any leads, he’d probably have to meaninglessly raid them like Claiomh had suggested. He could at least ask around first, he figured.

“Ask who, though... Well, guess I’ll play it by the book.” Orphen shrugged, pocketing the map.

“A training journey, you say? That’s awfully old-fashioned of you, kid... Oh, was that rude of me? Well, guess you should do all sorts of things while you’re young.” The aged police officer spoke to him with an exasperated tone. The old man looked as if he’d done exactly that however many decades before, but now his uniform was weathered and his skin was wrinkled. He must have retained his solid physique, either because he did a lot of patrolling or simply because he’d never been in enough of a dangerous situation to get badly injured.

“Right...” Orphen answered vaguely, giving the officer a blank sort of look. “I heard there were some training schools in this town, so I figured I’d spend some time with one of them, but I happened to hear some worrying rumors, so I thought I should ask about them.”

“Worrying rumors, eh? Worrying... If you ask me, the fact that you’re still here in this town means you haven’t heard the *real* rumors,” the officer said sardonically, gazing up at the sky.

Orphen looked up as well, scanning his surroundings while he was at it. The police station looked like it might barely accommodate two officers and likely had a small break room and a few cells in the back, though Orphen couldn’t see them from outside, of course. One of the officers must have been on patrol, since the old man was alone in the station. On the desk was a map of the town, stained in places with what looked like food. There weren’t a lot of things on the walls or desk, but the place was still rather cluttered.

Tossing into his mouth some cookies that must have been his lunch, the old man continued. “If you value your health, you should get out of this town. It’s the people who have some confidence in their abilities that tend to get caught up in trouble. This is a perfectly nice town, so long as you’re just living a normal life here...” Cookie crumbs fell from his salt-and-pepper mustache as the man spoke.

Orphen nodded. “So I shouldn’t get involved with the dojos?”

“That you shouldn’t.”

“Neither of them?” Orphen asked, and the old man got a bit of an odd expression on his face.

“Neither?” He stopped eating his cookies and looked up at Orphen. “Sure, I

think they're both menaces. They turn the streets lawless wherever they go."

"Well, shouldn't you just arrest them?" *That's your job, isn't it?* He kept the second comment to himself.

But the old man sighed heavily, his face showing the sort of patience you had to have with young people.

"The first incident occurred two years ago. It wasn't anything too serious at the time... Just a fight, really. Naturally, we arrested the perpetrators. What do you think happened then?"

Before Orphen could answer, the old man continued, "They retaliated. Several members of the arresting officer's family were indiscriminately attacked. It was impressive—it happened only three hours after the arrest. That's why it can be dangerous to arrest people in your home town. The higher-ups were furious. 'Round up the whole lot of them,' they screamed. This was after they'd gotten *their* families out of town, mind you." The old man gave a disgusted chuckle and shook his head. "Think we marched out, raring to go after them?"

Orphen shook his head too. He understood what the old man was saying but decided to argue anyway. "Won't they eventually go too far if you don't do anything, though?"

"You might be right. One day, we'll probably have to do it. But right now, it's easier to have a sort of unspoken agreement."

"An unspoken agreement?"

"Mhm. Long as they're keeping their stupid quarrel between themselves, we won't butt in. If we don't get involved, they don't get the general public involved either."

"Aren't they 'the general public' who just go to a dojo for fun, though?"

"Go take a look at Ed Crewbstar and then tell me that." The man snorted as if he found all this truly absurd. "Any married couple fighting over the headship of a dojo hard enough to kill someone ain't human."

It took Orphen a moment to realize what it was he'd just heard.

When he finally let out a “Huh?!” of comprehension, it sounded rather overwrought even to his own ears.



Claiomh picked up the picture frame that was face down on the desk and cocked her head—Leki slid down onto her shoulder when she did so.

“Why’s there a picture of the enemy boss here?”

“Hey... Claiomh...”

Ignoring the voice coming from behind her, she peered down at the picture. In it were Lottecia, that man named Ed, and another man she didn’t recognize. The last man was middle-aged, with white in his hair. He was smiling with his hands on the other two’s shoulders. The gesture seemed so open, and Claiomh instinctively guessed the man was Lottecia’s father. The picture looked like it was taken in front of the dojo.

Inside the square frame, Lottecia had her shoulders hunched, looking rather awkward. She didn’t know how many years ago the picture had been taken, but it couldn’t have been that many. There was no date or anything on it. While she was pondering this...

“Weren’t we leaving the investigation to Master? I don’t think we should be here...”

“Oh, shut up, would you?” Claiomh turned around, scowling.

Majic was watching her timidly, his face strained.

Claiomh pursed her lips and told him, “We’re doing what we can, because we can. Isn’t that only obvious?”

“I don’t think sneaking out during practice and snooping around someone’s room is ‘obvious’...”

“Well, the door wasn’t locked.”

“So what?!”

Claiomh returned the picture frame to the desk, ignoring Majic’s protests. Other than the picture frame, the only other things on the tidy desk were a

candle holder with some wax in it, some blank note paper, and a pen holder.

It wasn't just the desk; the rest of the room was neat too. Claiomh had thought a personal room inside the dojo might not be kept all that clean, but she'd been wrong. The carpet, the curtains, and the bed were all perfectly in order. There wasn't much furniture, but everything necessary was present. Maybe that was only obvious, considering Lottecia did live here.

Claiomh wasn't even sure herself what she was looking for in here, but she carefully observed the furnishings of the room nonetheless. There wasn't much she could tell from them other than Lottecia seemed to like blue. It was a clean, spartan room, with no decoration.

Claiomh sighed. "How old do you think Lotte is?" she asked Majic.

The boy was nervously watching the door, but he turned to Claiomh and answered, "Hmm... Around the same age as you?"

"Right?" She looked up and groaned. "It sure doesn't seem like it, though..."

"Well, everyone's different, right?" Majic said blithely and returned his gaze to the door.

He must have been rather nervous. It was true that they had no excuse for what they were doing, Claiomh supposed. She frowned, feeling like Majic had put a damper on her thoughts.

"Geez... It'll be fine. Lotte's still doing joint practice for a little while, and as long as she's practicing, nobody else stops either. We've got another five minutes, easy."

"How do you know no one's going to peek into the break room on a whim and see that we're not there?"

"If it happens, it happens. We're not used to it here yet, so we can just say we got lost on our way to the bathroom or something."

"This building isn't big enough to get lost in."

"Oh, you are so annoying! If you say it with enough conviction, you'll be able to fool them!"

"I don't want to have conviction in that..."

“Well, too bad! It said in my dad’s diary that if you can’t fool yourself, you won’t be able to fool other people. And he told us all to read it after he died in his will,” Claiomh said, sticking her finger up.

She glimpsed around. They didn’t have time to waste arguing like this. “Anyway, let’s split up and look. You go over there.”

“What are we even looking for?”

“Well, how should I know? I’m not Orphen. It’s my first time doing this. But there’s gotta be something that’ll explain what’s going on here.”

Claiomh scanned the books on a bookshelf from one side to the other. Petting Leki on her shoulder, she thought to herself. “I mean, when people have things to hide, they always hide them in their own rooms, right? People are just big bundles of nerves—that’s what my father said, anyway.”

“...I’ve been wondering this for a while, but what did your father do exactly, Claiomh?”

“Umm...” Claiomh started, before she looked over at Majic and exclaimed, “Hey! What are you doing?!”

Majic jumped, his hand on the closet door. He turned around and said, “Huh? You told me to look here...”

“I never said to look in her closet, you pervert!”

“I don’t think ‘pervert’ is called for...” Majic muttered rather pathetically.

Claiomh pushed him aside and cracked the closet door, hiding its contents from him with her body.

Naturally, it was dark inside, so she couldn’t see much, but... “Hm...?” Among the clothes, underwear compartments, and containers filled with various personal items, she thought she spied the out-of-place glint of metal.

The next instant, Leki leaped up on her shoulder. Claiomh looked down at him in surprise to find the baby dragon glaring with his green eyes into the darkness of the closet, his fur standing on end. Deep Dragons never showed their teeth, but he glared so furiously Claiomh almost felt like she could hear a growl coming from him.

“Wh-What?” Claiomh asked Leki dazedly. “What is it, Leki?”

She looked back into the closet where he was looking, trying to figure out what was going on. She opened the door a little wider—after scaring Majic off with a glare—and peered inside. There was something long in the back of the closet, hidden behind hanging clothes.

She took it out. It was... “A sword?”

It was indeed a sword. A normal size (that is, long for Claiomh), the sword had a red grip with ostentatious carvings on it and a metal sheath. The blade was all smooth lines and looked somewhat familiar to Claiomh. She couldn’t quite remember what it reminded her of, but she was sure she’d never seen this particular sword before. Had she seen a similar one at some point...?

Leki was still on alert, glaring at the sword. Such a thing hardly ever happened. Claiomh was starting to feel uneasy looking at the sword when she heard Majic pipe up behind her.

“Oh, those are...”

“What did you notice?” Claiomh asked without taking her eyes off the sword.

“There are letters carved into it. Do you think they’re Wyrd glyphs?”

“Wyrd glyphs?”

“Umm... You know, the really powerful sorcery the Celestials used. Like on the Sword of Baldanders, remember?”

Of course she remembered it, but sorcery was a little out of her league. Even the ornamentation Majic said was letters only looked like a pattern to her.

In any case, there was a mysterious sword here, and they didn’t know its true nature. After summarizing the situation to herself, Claiomh arrived at the most straightforward method to solve the mystery currently plaguing them.

“Okay,” she muttered, putting her hand on the sword hilt to draw it.

However, after straining for two breaths, she gave up. She couldn’t draw the sword from its sheath. It refused to budge, as if locked in place.

Just then...

“Ah!”

“What is it?”

She turned around when she heard Majic’s shout and froze.

“...Huh?”

The boy was looking at the doorway. The door had opened silently at some point, and a girl with a troubled expression stood there now. She had a wooden sword in hand and a look on her face like a mother cat bringing back a kitten that had tried to run away.

“You won’t be able to draw that sword,” Lottecia said. “No one can.” She had the sort of patience a competitor must have in her voice. “Do people ever tell you you’re a busybody, Claiomh?”

“Uhh... I think someone might have just done that yesterday...” Claiomh said slowly, shifting her eyes over to Majic. She asked the boy, who was holding his head, “How do you think she knew?”



The answer came from Lottecia instead of Majic, however. “I heard your voice,” she said with a straight face.

“O-Oh. I see. Wasn’t expecting that...” Claiomh stumbled over to Majic and gripped his shirt by the collar. “It’s because you made such a racket!”

“There’s no way I was louder than you!”

“Well, anyway... I get it.” Lottecia sounded defeated.

Claiomh stopped and looked over at her. Lottecia returned her gaze with eyes like frosted glass.

She narrowed her eyes, which were always half-closed anyway, even further. “If you want to know, I’ll tell you what’s going on. This is all the result of my own indecision, anyway.”



For some reason, no one seemed to know when Beedo Crewbstar first came to this town. All they knew for sure was that he wasn’t here ten years ago, but nine years ago, he was. At some point within that period, the swordsman brought a young girl here and opened up a swordsmanship school. He bought up a small piece of land with all the money he had in this town that was still developing and opened up his school. Some people still pointlessly wondered where that money came from, since the man was gaunt and his clothes were in tatters. He didn’t seem like the type to be carrying such a large amount of money on him. His skills, however, were impressive.

At the time, Nashwater, which was close to Urbanrama, was plagued by armed gangs of thieves that posed a great threat to the town’s public order. But Beedo drove back and eventually destroyed the thief gangs, all on his own. Displaying the strength of a demon, his crimson sword in hand, his school was flooded with new students, needless to say.

A few years passed and his daughter Lottecia displayed extraordinary skills with a sword as well. People idolized the father and daughter as guardian deities of the town. By that time, the town had developed to the point where it was almost unrecognizable from the place it had been only a few years before. Its relationship with Ledgeborne on top of the mountain had been established,

and both towns were flourishing. The town was peaceful now, and the dojo was no longer being flooded with new students. Everyone thought things would be easy from then on.

Until five years ago, when Ed showed up.

“Hmm...”

Was it the day before yesterday? That he’d seen that man looking up at the sky in despair in this park. Orphen rested, sitting on a bench in the same pose that man had. He entrusted his weight to the back of the bench, hooking his arms around it and looking up at the sky.

It was the same clear autumn sky it had been the day before yesterday. An indigo blue sky, with thin clouds drifting through it.

“So basically, it’s a domestic dispute...or like, a marital spat?”

He hadn’t been able to get much detailed information from the cop. Just that this Ed guy showed up one day, studied under Beedo, and married his daughter, Lottecia. The exceedingly young couple—Lottecia Crewbstar was fourteen at the time, and Ed was either nineteen or twenty—split after one year.

The reason for their split was probably the passing of Beedo, the old policeman had said with a heavy tone. Nobody knows which of the couple Beedo named his true successor on his deathbed, but the one who *wasn’t* named was obviously displeased by that fact. Lottecia and Ed had a truly destructive breakup. Most of the students of the dojo—especially the older ones who had joined out of admiration for Beedo himself—left then. Ed left town at the same time.

There was another sword training school in the town. It was composed of those who couldn’t keep up with Beedo’s harsh training, and it had never had a very good reputation. Lottecia’s school losing its standing created an opportunity for this other school to rise to an equal position. This was around when the dispute between the two schools started, meaning two years ago.

“At the end of the day, after Beedo Crewbstar—the largest symbol of power between them—died, the two schools had no way of proving their own strength except through petty squabbles. They lost all of their self control with

Beedo. It was the same thing at the Tower of Fangs. When they lost Master, Uoar Curlaine tried to take over..." Orphen muttered to himself.

It was a very similar situation. The only difference was that the training schools of this town didn't have the powerful and merciless upper echelon that the Tower had. The police should have filled that role, but they were ignoring the conflict, so the two schools were able to fight completely unrestrained.

Then, half a year ago, the event that should have brought this conflict to a close occurred. Ed returned to the town, but he didn't settle down with Lottecia, his former wife. He sided with the dojo opposing hers. This shocked everyone who knew the details of the situation, but it made sense to them as well.

Their conflict was only growing more extreme, and the police would probably have to get involved at some point. Everything would probably come to an end when that happened. All conflict comes to an end with time. It's just a question of who ends it and when.

Frankly speaking, Orphen had lost pretty much all of his interest in the conflict. He looked up at the sky vacantly after realizing that.

No, what he was interested in was something completely unrelated to the conflict. He knew this wasn't important or anything, but...people didn't have superpowers. Outside of sorcerers, that is.

"No matter how strong the guy was, could he really have taken out dozens of armed thieves with one sword?"

Well, it was just a legend. It must have been embellished over time.

"Of course, I'm just an outsider..."

Orphen looked down. His view changed from the sky to the earth.

"Do you get it?" he asked.

The park was empty save for himself and one man standing before the bench. No, this person wasn't old enough to be called a man—he was still a kid. The kid, who looked seventeen or eighteen years old, was watching Orphen with a wooden sword in hand.

He was maybe three meters away. Orphen estimated the distance and looked up at him from his place on the bench.

“He could do it,” the boy answered simply. He continued in a low, hoarse voice, “With that sword...he could kill dozens or hundreds.”

“Huh...” was all Orphen said. He frowned and muttered to no one in particular, “It’s too soon...”

“What?” the boy asked, but Orphen ignored him. That must have set him off, because his face twisted in anger.

Before he could take up his wooden sword, Orphen rose from the bench—the boy trembling in anger before him clearly wasn’t the patient type. He had already raised his sword and was charging at Orphen.

It’s too soon... Orphen repeated to himself absentmindedly. He clenched his fist and stepped forward. Shifting to avoid his opponent’s charge, he struck the boy’s arm with an open hand just before he was about to bring the sword down.

He caught the boy’s arm soundlessly. The boy didn’t seem to realize the situation he was in. Orphen took another step forward without even giving his opponent the time to change his expression. He kept his fist at his chest, ready to strike out at any time.

“Hmph!” He blew out a breath and thrust his fist into the boy’s totally unprotected side. He could hear air escaping from the boy’s throat. The boy fell backward like a bounced ball and writhed around on the ground, though Orphen wasn’t sure if it was because he was trying to keep resisting or because he was simply in agony.

“Urgh...ugh...!”

Orphen looked down at him and raised his right hand. “I call upon thee—” He went through his usual process of composing, deploying, and manifesting his spell. “Sisters of Destruction!”

When he chanted the words, a shock went through the boy’s body. The air exploded, and the boy’s body bounced when it struck the ground.

After the spell's effect faded, the boy was left unconscious on the ground. The wooden sword had long left his hand and was lying several meters away.

Looking not at the boy but at the sword, Orphen repeated, "It's too soon..."

He scratched his head. The situation didn't sit right with him. "I only just started asking around. Why am I already being attacked?"

He checked his surroundings. Fortunately, there was no one else in the vicinity that he could see—if there were, there would probably have been a bit of a commotion.

He'd assumed something like this might happen at some point. Actually, he'd been expecting it. Not because Claiomh had said so or anything, but it *was* the fastest way. He just hadn't expected this to happen quite so soon.

"Ed Crewbstar, huh...? So he's already caught on to our movements."

Picking up the unconscious boy, Orphen muttered to himself, "Guess it'd be fastest to go see him."

Wham!

Orphen threw the boy at the poorly fitted door, breaking it down. Stepping over the broken door, he announced, "Coming in."

More than being an aged building, the dojo seemed to have the sorrow of decline clinging to it. It wasn't just that it wasn't maintained or that it didn't get enough sun. It was just a problem with its general appearance.

The entrance led right into a large practice hall. After breaking through the door, the boy's body rolled twice and came to rest on the floor. The men inside the dojo began to shout.

"Bastard!" He didn't think they knew who he was—it seemed more like a reflexive reaction.

The man closest to him leaped at him barehanded. Orphen stepped through the doorway and stood on guard for half a breath.

The man's movements could not be called refined by any measure. He was rushing at Orphen with both arms in the air. Orphen moved one shoulder and

lowered himself a bit, thrusting a fist out at the same time.

“Gfh!” The man collapsed after taking Orphen’s fist in the middle of his torso.

Determining that this man would present no more trouble for him, Orphen turned around to see the other men running into the back of the dojo.

The man’s body hit the floor with a thud. He’d passed out and wasn’t moving anymore.

Orphen caught his breath and waited.

The men who had fled into the back of the dojo reappeared, each with a weapon in hand.

“Five, eh?” Orphen counted his adversaries and smirked. “I’d say we’re evenly matched, then.”

“Are you stupid?! You got guts charging into our home base like this, but you’re not getting out alive!” one of the men yelled, lifting up a sword—and not a wooden one.

Orphen quietly sucked a breath in. He held up both arms and intoned, “I release thee...”

When he started chanting, the men started looking nervous. “A sorcerer?!” Their frantic cries echoed through the dojo.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

For just an instant, there appeared to be a torrent of light flowing through the space. A line of pure white heat and power cut straight through the rectangular room, bursting apart in its center.

When the explosion subsided, the heat wave was still scorching the air, and two of the men had been struck down by the sorcerous blow. Confirming that, Orphen took a battle stance once again. He clenched his fist and pulled his right side back.

Sorcery became much less effective in a close-quarters fight, especially a free-for-all. After all, it took time to compose a spell, deploy it, and chant an incantation. Of course, it wasn’t as if you couldn’t use it at all, but big spells like the one he’d just used would be hard to pull off. It would actually be easier to

fight another sorcerer, since his opponent would want to use his sorcery too.

Either way, I can manage three opponents without using my sorcery... Orphen thought to himself, confirming his enemies' positions. There was one with a sword to his right and two with knives to his left.

He headed left without hesitation. The two men were charging headlong at him, maybe because they feared his sorcery after witnessing its might. Orphen swiftly stepped toward them.

They crossed paths for a split second. The man in front thrust his knife out, and Orphen lifted his leg at the same time—his steel-toed boot traced an arc in the air and smashed into the man's elbow. It took a mere moment. The man screamed, his arm bending in an impossible direction.

And, before the knife he'd dropped hit the floor...

Orphen moved half a step to the side to avoid the other man slashing at him. He shifted at the same time to get behind his adversary. Naturally, the man tried to follow him, but his lower body couldn't turn as fast as his upper body, so he didn't get all the way around. As the man twisted around, Orphen brought the edge of his boot down on the back of his knee. The man opened his eyes wide in shock and fell to the floor as if sinking into an icy sea. The man groaned, his feet swept out from under him, and Orphen delivered another strong kick to him, after which he stopped moving completely.

Just then...

There he is! Orphen sensed something behind him and threw himself forward. He leaped over his fallen enemies, rolled on the floor, and shot up again. The final man, with the sword, was charging at him now. When he looked back, he found the man swinging the sword right through the place where he just was.

There was sweat on the man's brow due to the heat wave that hadn't quite subsided yet. He pulled back the sword after swinging it and held it at an angle.

It was one-on-one now. Feeling the sweat welling up in his hands, Orphen told the man, "It's just you now."

The downed men showed no signs of recovering, Orphen confirmed with a few glances. The ones he'd taken out with his sorcery hardly needed

mentioning. One was just trembling, holding his broken arm, and the other was completely immobilized after a strong blow to his spine.

The last man with the sword confirmed the same thing. He clucked his tongue and said, “If Ed were here, you wouldn’t be...”

“Huh.” Orphen returned the gesture. “And here I thought *you* were Ed.”

“Ha!” the man snorted. His rugged face creased with anger as he raised his sword higher. “If you don’t know Ed’s face, you must not be one of Lottecia’s brats. What are you after?”

“That’s what I want to know. One of *your* brats just attacked me, so I brought him back here for you.” He indicated the boy lying on the floor.

“What?” There was clear confusion on the man’s face. He looked down at the boy and said, “I’ve never seen that kid before.”

“Huh?”

That’s when it happened.

Whap.

It was an awfully dry sound for a person leaping up from the ground. It happened in a mere instant. The boy, who’d been completely motionless up until now, stood from the floor with the spring of a gymnast.

The boy stood with his back to Orphen and, without looking back at him, reached out to the man with the sword. All this happened without a sound.

“Wha—?!” The man’s shout became his last words.

From several meters away, the boy’s pointer finger whipped out like a bullet and pierced the man’s eye. The man collapsed with a scream—and the boy’s tendril-like finger gouged into his eye socket and stirred around inside it. The man’s body spasmed, his back twisting into a mad arch...before he stopped moving completely.

“...?!” All Orphen could do was watch. Taken completely by surprise, all Orphen did was stare at the back of the silent boy’s head.

After a few seconds, the boy turned around, but he was no longer a boy. His

elongated finger was the same, but the rest of his build had changed. His small frame had expanded into the rugged, angular body of an adult. Even his face and skin had changed. His hair had gone from black to blond. His lips were twisted coldly into a cynical smile. Even what he was wearing was different. His workout clothes had changed to a worn suit. And...

His eyes had been brown, but they were a completely different color now. The enormous eyes on his face shined a vibrant green. When his transformation was complete, they settled on a murky blue.

He was absolutely certain of it now.

Orphen recalled him perfectly. This wasn't the sort of person you easily forgot about—it was the man in despair he'd seen the day before yesterday in the park. There was no doubt about it.

When his transformation finished, the men other than Orphen who were still conscious began to scream. Seeing a metamorphosis they had no way of understanding, all they could do was scream, until the next moment, when they were silenced.

The man's eyes glowed green again. And, in an eerie repeat of a moment earlier, the man's middle and ring finger extended while he stood in the same exact pose. The fingers whipped out, undulating in ways that completely ignored the joints they should have contained, and plunged into the two fallen men's necks. Blood sprayed out and dyed the dojo a deep crimson.

"Why..." the man muttered after turning his eyes blue again. He went on completely indifferently, "Why I go out of my way to take this form when I kill is something that puzzles my kin... Even I don't know the reason. It must be instinctual."

The man didn't move at all as he spoke—even his throat was completely still. Orphen shuddered, watching him. He didn't know exactly what the danger was, but his whole body was warning him of it. He mustn't look, he mustn't listen, he mustn't *know*. However...

Dammit... Orphen knew. No matter what he wanted, he *had* to listen.

The man in despair went on, unchanged. "It really doesn't matter what form

I'm in, honestly. Some of my kin engage in distasteful things like showing up in their victims' forms to surprise them before they kill them. It just means there's all types. As for me... It's not as if I particularly like this form. Why is it, really..."

"You're..." Orphen groaned, voice trembling. But he couldn't finish the sentence.

The man in despair finally changed his expression. Not by much—he merely parted his lips slightly. "You can't imagine it?"

Orphen shook his head. Those green eyes... The only ones who possessed those were...

"A dragon..."

"A Red Dragon, to be precise. You've never seen one before, have you? If you had, it would be the shame of our clan."

Red Dragon—Orphen considered the designation. Red Dragons, Berserkers. It was said that they were large bears with red fur, but no one had ever seen one to confirm that. They were one of the species of dragons that humans knew of but could not confirm.

He quietly went on. "You've met Asraliel, haven't you? You should learn my name too, then. It's Helpart." As he spoke, his remaining thumb and pinky finger stretched out soundlessly as well.

Orphen realized what was about to happen and shouted, "Stop!"

But the fingers had whipped out at imperceptible speeds, and by the time he'd shouted, they'd already removed the heads of the two men lying in the back of the room. It had only taken a second. His fingers seemed to only brush them, but the heads of the men tore off with an exceedingly unpleasant sound.

Helpart—the Red Dragon had moved nothing other than his fingers.

Not his neck, nor his eyes. Orphen suddenly realized the man had never even blinked.

He stared at Orphen with his color-changing eyes and spoke to him with that same static voice. "I am not like Asraliel. I do not make illicit deals with irregulars, human sorcerer."

He had lowered his head slightly, but his gaze was still fixed on Orphen. “Human sorcerer. No, representative of humanity as a whole, can you withstand being on the verge of destruction...?”

What...? Orphen had no idea what was going on. However... *I see...* He understood something clearly then.

The Red Dragon before his eyes was a more clear embodiment of that destruction than anything else—and he was currently exposed to it.

Chapter V: Bonds of the Sword

“That’s right! You feint a roll to the side and actually roll to the front or to the back or don’t roll or give up or give in or stand back up! That is the ultimate secret technique: Complacent Happy Life! Understand, my pupil?!”

“Yes, Master!”

Volkan and Ryan were making a scene on the street in front of the dojo—they must have gotten kicked out of the practice hall. A ways away, Dortin sat with his knees to his chest, observing them.

Looking down on them from a window on the second floor, Claiomh muttered, “Must be nice to be so carefree...”

“But what I’m doing...” Lottecia started in response, but her words stopped there. She was holding the crimson sword close, her eyes empty.

Claiomh turned around and waited for her to continue.

Lottecia smiled self-deprecatingly and said, “What I’m doing might not be all that different from them.” The light returned to her eyes. She looked out the window and said, “It’s nothing more than a cruel parody... Don’t you think?”

“But they’re idiots.”

“And so am I.” Lottecia smiled again, but it wasn’t self-deprecating this time. It was just a simple smile on her face, framed by her short black hair.

She went over to her desk and picked up the picture frame that was face-down on it. “Sometimes I still think I love him, and that he must feel the same way.”

Claiomh was still in Lottecia’s room, but it was a lot less comfortable there now. She felt uneasy, and wasn’t sure where to look, so she’d been glancing around awkwardly for some time. She couldn’t look at Lottecia, who was gazing down at the picture in her hands with a smile like she might start to cry at any moment, and Majic, who was standing around in the corner of the room just

like her, was no help either. When she'd tried to bring up the idiots clamoring outside the window, all she'd gotten was that line about a "cruel parody."

This wasn't the sort of situation she thrived in, but she couldn't blame Lottecia for that. Claiomh sighed surreptitiously.

Now that she thought about it, this room might have been Lottecia herself—or maybe Lottecia was this room itself. It didn't matter which way, but it had everything it needed, and nothing more. And the person herself was well aware of that fact.

Thinking such thoughts, Claiomh returned her gaze to Lottecia. "That's not stupid at all."

She felt her lips pursing due to the way she tended to talk. She paused and relaxed them—she didn't want to seem like she was criticizing Lottecia—and held Leki at her chest, like Lottecia was holding the sword. "I mean, maybe you're right about that," she corrected herself.

She looked at Lottecia. The girl's expression hadn't changed.

All the more uncomfortable, she asked, "The guy in that picture with you is Ed, right? Were you...together, or something?"

"He was my husband."

"Husband?!" A voice rang out in the small room.

Claiomh was frozen in silence for a moment before she strode over to Majic, who was standing still with his mouth wide open. She gave him a swift kick in the shin.

"Ow!"

"Why did you yell like that?! That's kind of rude, isn't it?!"

"You definitely yelled just now too, Claiomh!" Majic protested, wobbling on one foot as he held his kicked shin.

Suddenly, they heard laughing. They turned around and found Lottecia chuckling, her hand to her mouth.

She put the picture frame back on the desk and smiled, saying, "It's fine. *It is*

unusual. Ed and I married three years ago—when I was fourteen. I don't think that's all that strange back where I come from, but..."

"Where you come from?"

"My father brought me here when I was young, so I don't remember it very well," she said, cutting across the room to reach the window. She peered out at Nashwater's refreshing autumn scenery and continued, "I believe it was a very beautiful place, though. All my memories from when I was young are happy ones, after all. I remember listening to the wind rustle the tree branches, and how cold the water was. I think my father chose to settle down here because this town reminded him of our home." She looked out on the town of flowers, Nashwater, with tranquil eyes.

"Then—" Claiomh smiled at her, finally relieved. At the very least, they weren't at a total impasse anymore. "Your more recent memories have to be happy too. Aren't they?"

"...I suppose so." Lottecia turned around as she said that.

Claiomh hesitated, but she decided to ask anyway. "But, umm... Can I ask... He 'was your husband'?"

Lottecia just nodded. Claiomh wasn't entirely sure what that meant, but after a moment, she realized that Lottecia was leaning against the window frame and staring into space, and she decided not to ask further.

This was an extremely personal matter, obviously. Coming to that conclusion, she thought to herself, *I should at least be polite enough to wait.*

Eventually, Lottecia made a small gesture. She held out the crimson sword to Claiomh.

Claiomh stared at it for a few seconds and then pointed to herself and asked, "Me?"

Lottecia just silently nodded once more.

Claiomh took a hesitant step forward and took the sword. It was lighter than it looked and felt like it was hardly there in her hands. Was that because it had something to do with sorcery, like Majic said? It was probably because of that,

she figured.

She didn't feel its weight, but the material of it felt real enough. It was an angular, straight sword. The length of its grip suggested it was meant to be wielded with two hands, but the blade didn't seem to have the length for that. The grip was a complex metal carving, but there were no gems or anything adorning it. It seemed at once both delicate and rugged. Was it just an ornament, or was it a practical weapon? It seemed wholly beyond classification.

"Freak Diamond."

"Huh?" Claiomh looked up, taken aback by the phrase uttered while she was observing the sword.

Lottecia was looking right at her, so their eyes met. There was a shadow of loneliness in her gaze that persistently remained when she blinked, as if to say it would not be erased. Those eyes seemed to tell a tale of her memories. Such thoughts came to Claiomh's mind unbidden.

"That's what my father called that sword," Lottecia clarified. "My father was a talented swordsman, but even he admitted that the secret to his legendary strength was in that sword. It's a magic blade. On his deathbed, my father told me its true name..." She stopped and licked her lips before continuing, "The Sword of Korkt."

"Kor...?"

"It means 'crest of insects sword.'"

"Then it was forged by the Celestials, like I thought," Majic, who'd just been listening, suddenly piped up. He gazed at the sword from a short distance, his voice trembling with emotion. "It makes sense that you couldn't draw it, then. Master said almost all Celestial-forged weaponry came with safety devices so that if you didn't know how to use them or what they did, you couldn't wield them."

Claiomh listened to what he had to say, then turned back to Lottecia.

She shook her head and said, "I don't know how to use it either. No one knows. My father..." She put her own hand over Claiomh's on the sword and said with a sigh, "His last words were that neither Ed nor I were worthy to be his

successor. He took the secret of the blade to his grave...”

“Then...” Claiomh started, then realized she had nothing to say. But that didn’t matter, because Lottecia’s expression twisted, interrupting anything she might say anyway. She wrinkled her nose, her brows drawing up and eyes opening wide. Claiomh wanted to pull back, but since Lottecia’s hand was on hers, she had to stop herself at a few centimeters.

Lottecia opened her mouth, her cheeks trembling somewhere around where her molars were. Claiomh heard a strange sound and searched for the source of it, finding Lottecia’s fingers tense like claws on top of her hand. The sound had been her joints popping as she clenched her hand.

“And Ed left me.” Only her voice remained calm. “Telling me there was no reason for him to stay any longer.”



Orphen just quietly clenched his fists. He clenched his fists, though he had no idea how much meaning such an action had, and pulled his chin and arms in, lowering his center of gravity. Moving half of his body back in his familiar stance, he waited in silence for his destruction.

That destruction, the elongated fingers stretched out in the dojo where five corpses lay on the floor, merely pulled back to their normal length. The man flicked his wrist and bits of the blood and flesh clinging to his hand were cast to the floor.

Helpart. Orphen repeated the name to himself. He’d never heard it before, of course. Though he had heard of Red Dragons.

Red Dragons, Berserkers—they were a lost dragon race, the sort that only appeared in legends now. Crazy, daring warriors who never backed down from a fight. Although some called them an insane race who knew how to do nothing but kill, some of them were cunning, able to come up with new languages on the fly in order to have secret conversations in front of their enemies. There were many mysteries surrounding their therianthropy sorcery, but one thing was for sure: it used their flesh and blood as a medium and allowed them to freely transform. They could, say, instantly extend fingers hardened enough to gouge out a human’s throat.

“I see,” Helpart suddenly muttered. There was no malice in his expression, and he spoke as if the words were simply appearing on his lips. “I see... As soon as I learned of your identity, I had to stop you. Hmm... He forced our interests to coincide. I suppose that was his aim.”

“What are you talking about?” Orphen asked.

It was exceedingly difficult to converse with someone of his species—the very foundation of their intelligence was different—but it should still be possible to patiently draw information out of him.

However, Helpart didn’t take his bait. He licked his lips and said as if making small talk, “Getting my help without making me accrue any losses isn’t nearly as charming as crying and begging for my assistance. Or is that just my pride talking?”

“My identity?”

“It’s clear who benefits from this situation. Right about now, he’s probably off stealing the sword. He couldn’t move until now because he was wary of me. That’s not what I expected. So he had caught on to our existence. I don’t like that.”

“I release thee—” Orphen fired his sorcery at full power. “Sword of Light!”

White light converged on the spot where Helpart was talking to himself—there was a flash of lightning and a tremor that rocked the whole building. The floor under his target was singed instantly, a black ring forming around the explosion’s center. Once the heat had subsided and Orphen’s vision had returned to normal, Helpart was there no longer.

“...That actually worked?” he muttered to himself.

As he caught his breath, Orphen waited. He knew that this wasn’t over. And just as he thought, a voice came from behind him.

“Even if I’m hit or attacked with a shockwave...”

Orphen spun around. The man in the worn-out suit stood there with his weight on one foot, staring rather casually at Orphen.

“Impacts don’t really affect me. But I can’t have you burning me. Don’t you

think it's rude to attack me while we're talking?"

"You weren't talking to *me*." Orphen spat and took his stance again. "Humans get combative when communication fails. Remember that."

"Hmm. A race with no history is barbaric indeed." The man said, pointing his fingers at Orphen in a pose that signified some amount of caution.

He'd already shown that he could commit murder by moving those fingers faster than the eye could capture. Orphen strained his eyes to capture his opponent's movements. He could feel a tension headache forming around his temples.

"Well, either way, I don't lose anything," Helpart murmured, nodding to himself. "My partner is guarding the sword, after all."

"Sword?"

"Merely a silly toy. But even such a thing ended up necessary..."

"Guide my path—" He'd just been told that this would have no effect, but the man would have to dodge it at least, Orphen figured. He leaped to the side and finished, "Deathsong Starling!"

BOOM! The air ruptured. Powerful vibrations pushed toward Helpart's body, warping the very space around him. Orphen observed him and plotted his next move. He had to figure out his opponent's capabilities and find some way to disable him or he had no chance of surviving.

A moment later, Helpart's arm stretched out with no warning. The arm flew out and hit the wall, propelling Helpart's body the other way. The only thing remaining in the place where Orphen's spell exploded was his arm. Powerful shockwaves tore apart the sleeve of his suit and wrenched the arm apart, bone and all.

Skin and blood vessels, flesh and bone tore apart, and the elongated, thin arm flew in the other direction like a piece of a puppet. But Helpart didn't so much as change his expression. As Orphen watched, his arm regenerated instantly from the point where it had broken off.

As for the arm that had been separated from the man...

“What?!”

The severed arm also instantly regenerated—a whole new torso, head, another arm, and legs. Helpart became two, and both of them looked at Orphen with the same expression.

“Which do you think is real?” Both Helparts said the same thing at the same time. “The fake will become a corpse in a few seconds. Which will you attack?”

Both of them raised an arm and pointed it at him.

“Tch!” Orphen rasped, and jumped back several steps. He didn’t have time to think, but fifty-fifty odds were too risky to bet his life on.



Then— He shouted, composing a spell. I'll blow them both away!

"I construct thee, Spire of the Sun!"

White-hot flames engulfed his vision—a heat wave and a thunderous roar shook the room. The flames rampaged like a serpent, consuming the cheaply-constructed dojo like it was a shabby animal's den.

Orphen rolled through the broken door onto the street outside. A crowd had gathered, likely because of the repeated screams and crashes coming from the building.

"What— What's going on?!" A balding middle-aged man ran up to Orphen, a look of consternation on his face. He seemed unsuspecting of Orphen, who was clearly an outsider, because of the bad reputation of the dojo. Orphen was thankful for that, but he didn't have time for pleasantries.

"Run!" Orphen raised his voice so that not only that man but the rest of the crowd would hear him. "A monster's coming!"

One of the onlookers raised a scream. Flames were coiling around the dojo. It didn't seem like it would collapse at any moment, but there was a lot of damage in places.

Orphen looked up at the dojo, rubbing the skin of his arm where it was burned in his escape. He might have made a mistake. He shook his head when he thought that. Maybe he should have taken the fifty-fifty bet.

Helpart stood on the roof of the burning dojo, staring down haughtily at him. Orphen gazed up at him, thinking desperately.

Helpart was completely uninjured. With his physical capabilities, even engulfed in flames, it would be easy enough for him to break through the roof to escape. Orphen should have taken that into consideration. He'd given his enemy a space he could move endlessly through and hide in, and...he'd given him plenty of surplus targets he could easily kill.

This isn't good...

Orphen turned to the man who had yet to flee and repeated, "Run. Get everyone away from here. Anyone who hasn't fled, make sure they get away."

He lightly grasped the pendant at his chest and added, “I’m a sorcerer from the Tower of Fangs. I’ll get this situation under control. So please, evacuate until I can do that.”

He thought the man had nodded, but he didn’t have time to confirm that he’d understood everything Orphen had told him. Orphen looked away from the man and glanced up at the roof again. Helpart was just standing there, wind blowing around him and flames licking at him. He was completely still.

“?!” Orphen suddenly realized something and felt his lungs spasming.

The unmoving Helpart on the roof suddenly let his head drop and fell, completely limp. He rolled like a lifeless object and crashed into the ground. His body was no longer living.

“So that was the fake!” Orphen spat, and turned around. After getting his attention, Helpart should have moved to Orphen’s other side.

The crowd was fleeing down the main street and into alleyways—but just as he looked their way, something thin like a whip flashed and their bodies were all sliced to ribbons.

Orphen just stood there dumbly. As blood sprayed and body parts flew through the air, he found Helpart, the man’s elongated fingers coiling around his body.

“Sorry. But I told you it would shame me to be seen, didn’t I? This unsightly form, my ugly karma.”

Curiously, his fingers were trembling. Not Helpart’s, but Orphen’s. They were shaking, unable to stay still.

Orphen raised his convulsing hand up to his face and told Helpart, “There’s no need to apologize.”

His fingers were still shaking. He pierced his pinky finger with his canine and tore into its flesh, mixing the blood from the wound with his saliva in his mouth.

“But now you’ve made me mad. Don’t think you’re gonna get away with it.” His fingers all went still.

The burning-down dojo and the wind echoed through the empty streets.

He wasn't expecting Helpart to cower and beg for forgiveness or anything like that, but seeing him narrow his eyes coldly made Orphen tense his neck muscles.

He didn't need a stance anymore. He didn't need technique. If none of it would work on him, then it was all useless.

All he had to do was kill him. He'd experienced this sensation several times in the past. He felt his anger guiding him as he held his opponent in his sight.

Red Dragons were not as they appeared. But he could come up with hundreds of ways to end his opponent's existence just by watching him.

However...

"...Let's not," Helpart said all too simply. He shrugged his shoulders and stepped back into a safe range.

"What?" Orphen growled.

But Helpart just casually told him, "It doesn't seem like I'll win. I'm not sure why, but that's the feeling I get."

"You bastard, you really think—"

"I do not make illicit deals with irregulars, but..." Helpart carried on talking to himself with no regard for anyone who might happen to be listening. "If your power is that great... If you have inherited a legitimate power, then things are different. I will borrow this."

"That's not all you'll be borrowing!" Orphen tried to step forward, but he caught himself just before he could. Everything had changed now that his opponent had escaped to a safe distance. The space between them, the methods, their positions, everything. If he stepped forward, he no longer knew which of them would be in danger.

Helpart must have known that he couldn't step forward, and was satisfied by that. He smirked for the first time. A man in despair's bittersweet satisfaction.

"You don't seem to be aware of this yet, but you shouldn't think of yourself as a carefree wanderer any longer. There are more people paying attention to you than you might think. Though that is actually because of your sister..."

“Azalie?!”

“Well, naturally, after what she did.” Helpart smiled once more and took another step back.

“We’ll likely meet again. I can come visit you whenever I want, after all. Oh, that’s right... Those children that you travel with—you should probably go rescue them. My partner is a good-natured man, so he will likely not do anything reckless, but the one attacking the dojo for the sword is probably more brutal than I am. It’s likely started by now.”

He took another step back. The rest was simple. He backed up a few more times and then disappeared.

Orphen didn’t move until he could no longer see the man. His entire body was screaming in pain. The bruises and burns he hadn’t noticed when he was focused on Helpart were tormenting him now.

“Azalie...” he murmured.

And he realized. There was one more group who knew where she might be. It was something he’d never thought about, like outside of the continent. The gods outside of the barrier...and the dragons, who had been fighting against them for a thousand years. The masters of the continent, who were almost definitely watching her now that she’d slipped through the barrier to the outside world...

But right now...

Orphen looked up. He could hear the sound of an alarm carried on the wind from somewhere distant. Somebody must have reported the fire.

He ran off, dragging his heavy feet.

“Claiomh and Majic... They’re in trouble?”

He headed for Lottecia’s swordsmanship school as he asked himself the question.



“Mm! Magnificent, my pupil. You have truly mastered my ultimate secret technique, the Writhing in Agony Daddy! There is nothing left for me to teach

you...”

As Volkan cried his manly tears, Dortin quietly whispered from behind him, “If there’s nothing left for you to teach him, he won’t take us out to eat as thanks anymore.”

“But you mustn’t forget that you are merely a fledgling who has only just begun to train, my pupil! The path to the sword is a long, harsh, long, long one. That third ‘long’ is especially long. To summarize, I’d like to keep this up for another thirty years or so. Understand, my pupil?”

“Yes, Master!” exclaimed the blond man—though it was a very fake-looking blond—as he knelt deeply. His head was bowed, his sword lying before his knee in a pose of complete obedience.

Watching his brother standing tall in front of the man, Dortin held back a small yawn. He’d thought sword training out on the street would be extremely dangerous, but no one came and complained. This street didn’t get too much traffic in the first place, he supposed. Of course, even if someone *had* seen them, they probably wouldn’t have thought what they were doing was sword training. If they saw two people trying to balance wooden swords on their toes without getting tired of it, they probably just wouldn’t want to get involved with them.

Of course, since this was getting him regular meals, he couldn’t complain. Dortin decided to enjoy the autumn sunlight, feeling rather peaceful for the first time in a long while. All he had to do was relax in the sun’s rays and wait for their ridiculous “training” to end. And he was no stranger to the ridiculous at this point.

As he sat on the ground watching their practice from a short distance away, he suddenly noticed an unfamiliar human standing next to him. Dortin shot up, thinking it was someone who had come to complain. If so, it was his job to persuade them.

He looked up at the human, who was wearing a strange black cloak. Dortin couldn’t tell what they wore under the cloak, but they had a bundle that was long and thin in one hand. It looked like a meter-long rod wrapped in cloth.

The person’s hair was long. He was a man, but his looks would probably fall

into the category of “beautiful” for humans. Dortin usually found it hard to distinguish between humans’ faces unless they had very distinctive features or he had a certain degree of familiarity with them, but he thought he would recognize this man if he saw him again tomorrow. He thought the man was probably a few years older than twenty.

“Oh.” Dortin turned to him and exclaimed. “Can I...help you?”

The man had a scar on his lip.

Chapter VI: Guidance of the Sword

Majic closed the door—at some point, he'd gone over to it and shut it. Claiomh turned around at the thud and found him giving her an awkward smile.

“Uh... It was just bothering me.”

That wasn't much of a reason, Claiomh thought as she glared at Majic, but she had to thank him for giving her an opportunity to tear her eyes away from Lottecia. She was still holding the sword, though since she had turned away, Lottecia's hand was no longer on hers. She turned back slowly to the other girl.

What she saw was a sad smile. Lottecia was smiling quietly, like the expression she'd glimpsed for a moment before had simply been an illusion.

“I understand what you meant,” she suddenly said.

Claiomh blinked a few times, unsure what she was referring to.

Lottecia's expression deepened slightly. “About Ed—I can't just leave him be. I need to settle things.”

“Oh, that...” Claiomh's throat seemed to spasm. “I only, err, said that 'cause, umm... I didn't know the situation was so complicated...”

“No, it's very simple.” There was a slight shadow of pain on her face when she said that. The strength left her expression. “He left me once before and then appeared asking for my father's sword, Freak Diamond. He must have found some clue regarding how to wield it. I know that if I just pretend nothing is wrong, he'll show up again one day.”

And that was what caused her pain... Claiomh hesitated, feeling almost like she'd heard a voice from somewhere. It was clear to her even without it being put into words. That was painful to Lottecia, she was sure. Seeing this man named Ed.

As Lottecia smiled courageously, Claiomh bit her lip, trying not to show on her face that she pitied the other girl—she thought that would have been a terribly

disrespectful thing to do.

“If he intends to come here...then I should be the one to stand against him. I’ve always known that.”

“Well, I’ll help you!” Claiomh found herself saying, though even she knew she was being hasty.

“C-Claiomh?!” Majic exclaimed from behind her.

“Well, if he’s trying to take a memento of her father’s, he’s just a thief! And there’s no need to have an honest, fair fight with a thief. Majic might just slow you down, but Orphen would never lose to a jerk like him. And I—”

The sound of a knock cut her off. Claiomh shut her mouth and turned around. Majic was staring blankly at the door too. The room was silent for a few moments.

“Who is it?” Lottecia finally asked.

“Me. It’s an emergency, so I’m coming in.” The door opened to reveal Ryan. He looked around the room blankly. For it being “an emergency,” there wasn’t much urgency to him.

“Oh?” he said when he laid eyes on the sword in Claiomh’s hands. “Your father’s sword? Airing it out?”

“Ryan. If it’s an emergency, I imagine some haste is necessary.” Though she was used to his antics, Lottecia still sounded exasperated with the young man.

Ryan laughed and nodded. “True enough. You have a visitor, Lottecia.”

“A visitor?”

“And a very well-timed one, at that.”

“...You were listening in, I take it?” This time, Lottecia sounded completely fed up.

But it was all the same to Ryan, apparently. He scratched his head with that same carefree attitude as always and said, “I just happened to hear.”

He winked in a vague enough direction that Claiomh wasn’t sure if it was at her or Lottecia. And in the room’s dry air, Ryan said, so theatrically that it

seemed to sting her ears, “It’s Ed.”

They headed down the stairs and peeked into the training hall, which was filled with a strange tension. No, rather than tense, it was more that the air was heavy. Deeply, darkly heavy, like a gigantic monument that could never be moved. Tension could be cut, and that was the end of it, but the air in the hall was different. It was like a gate bound heavily by iron chains. Something whose role was no longer to open. It was a tension that had vowed to never be broken.

The trainees all stood with their swords in their hands and fearsome looks on their faces. It scared Claiomh. She stepped into the practice hall behind Lottecia, feeling a chill run down her spine.

Lottecia. Yes, her... Claiomh thought to herself as she watched the girl’s back. She wanted to see her face. Wanted to know what she was feeling. What she was thinking. Her instincts were telling her that she needed to know.

Her head never so much as swayed on her shoulders as she strode forward. Behind the swordswoman with her ramrod-straight posture, Claiomh strengthened her grip on the sword—Lottecia’s father’s sword.

She could feel Leki nosing around her bangs on her head. He must have sensed how tense she was. The baby dragon could probably smell her sweat. She tried to let some of the tension out of her shoulders.

She couldn’t see Lottecia’s face, but she could see the face of the man Lottecia was staring at. He stood, leaning against the wall near the entrance to the practice hall, a black-haired man with his arms crossed. He wore a black cloak and carried a long thin package. He looked different from the man she’d seen several days earlier, but his glossy black hair, aloof gaze, and, more than anything, the scar on his lip, marked him as unmistakably the same person. Ed.

Majic and Ryan followed Claiomh into the hall—she glanced back to make sure they were behind her.

The practice hall was by no means small, but it was starting to feel suffocating with the number of people currently inside it: Ed, Lottecia, Claiomh, Majic, Ryan, and seven trainees of the dojo. Volkan and Dortin also stood in a corner of the room, looking rather self-important.

Just as she was thinking would likely be the case, the first to open their mouths were the dwarves—the only two people in this place who weren't feeling any of the tension in the room.

“So!” Volkan's voice resounded through the practice hall. “This lanky swordsman has come to this dojo to challenge the assistant instructor in the presence of me, a famed swordsman and folk hero of Masmaturia, the Great Vulcano Volkan!”

The “lanky swordsman” he was referring to was likely Ed, though most humans were probably lanky to the dwarf. The man didn't bat an eye at anything the dwarf said, though it looked to Claiomh like he might have been holding back a snicker.

The assistant instructor, meaning Lottecia, also didn't react to Volkan's words, though since Claiomh couldn't see her face from where she was standing, she didn't know how much emotion her expression might have shown.

“Long time no see, Ed.” Her voice was firm, resolute. At the very least, she was calm enough not to show her agitation outwardly.

Claiomh stepped forward, relieved, intending to stand by Lottecia's side, but she was stopped by a hand grasping her shoulder. She looked back in surprise to find Ryan shaking his head at her, one eye closed. Claiomh shook off his hand, but stayed where she was too.

She turned back to Lottecia to find her accepting a wooden sword from one of the trainees and facing off silently against Ed.

“At this dojo...” she quietly said without holding the sword up—though her opponent also wasn't holding his, so there was no reason for her to do so either. “Our policy is no inter-school matches.”

A stir went through the trainees. They all raised objections one after another.

“Lottecia?!”

“You're still saying things like—”

But Lottecia didn't respond to a single one of them. She just went on matter-of-factly. “However...” Her voice was cold. “If it's a duel you want, I will accept. I

assume that's what you're after."

"Very courageous of you after you've spent all this time running." Ed's tone wasn't cold, but it was dry. He took a step forward from the wall, a wry smile on his face. There was the faint sound of metal scraping. Maybe he was heavily equipped underneath the cloak.



“Well, I don’t really get it, but it seems like everyone’s here now.” The self-important, solemn words came from Volkan. He must have wanted to impress on everyone his control of the situation. He stood tall with his legs wide, huffing his breaths through his nose. He narrowed his eyes and glared snidely between Ed and Lottecia. “Incidentally, I think in matches like this, the most important thing is bribing the referee.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Ed said curtly. “I am sure the outcome of the match will be clear. I’ll be using this.” He stood the long hockey stick-like package against the wall and took a slender silver blade out from underneath his cloak. The dark metal had a dull glint to it. It was a double-edged longsword with a streamlined shape. He touched the tip of the heavy bringer of death to the floor and stood still.

“Hey!” Claiomh couldn’t help herself from shouting. “Do you want to *kill* each other?!”

There was a commotion at the gruesome word, like a fictional creature everyone had imagined but no one thought existed was suddenly thrust before their eyes. Even the flushed faces of the trainees suddenly paled.

As for Ed, he just shrugged. “‘Kill *each other*’ isn’t quite right now, is it? It’s not like we’re both going to die, after all.”

“If you’re trying to scare me, it’s not going to work.” Lottecia looked back over her shoulder. Her face was as pale as a corpse’s, but she appeared calm. “Claiomh, there are some swords in the back. Could you bring me one?”

“Huh?” *Why me?* she thought, but when she looked around, she felt like she understood. Everyone else was too on edge. The slightest thing might set them off.

Claiomh suddenly realized that the people here were even less familiar with real fights than she’d thought. Perhaps that was true for Lottecia too... *She probably thought I wouldn’t do anything unnecessary if she asked me for something.* She nodded and headed for the back, all the while carrying the crimson sword she couldn’t unsheathe.

As she backed up, she realized Ryan was coming with her. She hadn’t really

thought anything of it, but he was rather calm as well. She shot a look at him, but he casually avoided her gaze and followed after her.

“Why are *you* coming with me?” she hissed at him, but he just grinned back. Like usual, there was something deceptive about his smile.

“Just thought you might want someone to show you where the swords are.”

“If *you* go, then there’s no point in *me* going, is there?”

“Well, Lottecia asked you to do it.”

“...Fine.” Claiomh glumly accepted his company, knowing that nothing she said would get through to him. She sent a look to Majic, who was nervously watching her—“Keep it together!”—and quickly returned to the back of the dojo from the training hall.

“Geez...” Claiomh muttered as she ran. “Why is everyone such an idiot?”

“That said, living wisely doesn’t guarantee a life with no regrets, so doing as you please is one way to live. It’s the same for everyone in the end, after all... We’ll all die one day.”

Claiomh ignored Ryan and ran past the break room. On the right side of the hall, there was a closet. If there were swords anywhere, they would be here. The old door had a sturdy lock on it, but she had heard it was kept open as long as there were people in the training hall. It was a security measure that she couldn’t be sure had any meaning...but that was probably why Lottecia kept the sword that was her father’s memento in her own room.

She opened the door, listening to the creaking of its hinges. Behind the orderly rows of wooden swords and equipment, she could see a covered crate. Entering the room and removing the covering, she found a set of swords, just like she expected.

There were all sorts of different kinds, but none of them had any sort of ornamentation. They weren’t much different than a collection of carpentry tools in that sense. Claiomh hesitated for a bit, then picked up the sword *she* would find easiest to use, since she was about the same size as Lottecia. It was likely that anything easy for her to use would be easy for Lottecia to use too.

“About what I was saying before...” When Claiomh looked up, Ryan had somehow gotten uncomfortably close to her. His strange clothes stood out all the more in this dim closet. He waved his hands breezily and continued, “What do you think? What sort of life do you think is truthfully meaningful?”

“I think your beliefs are shown in what you choose to do. But...” Claiomh held Freak Diamond and the other sword, glaring up at Ryan. “But my father also said that if you think it’s okay to hurt other people, then you’re just being a hypocrite. And that wasn’t when he was dying, but when he was still sane.”

“You think you can be true to yourself without hurting others?”

“Of course you can,” Claiomh answered instantly, feeling frustrated for reasons she couldn’t quite describe. “If you’re smart, you can. There’s something wrong with anyone who thinks they can’t.”

She made to leave the closet, but Ryan had gotten in her way at some point, and stood as if to block her.

She sighed, irritated. “Come on, move. We’re in a hurry, you know.”

But Ryan didn’t even appear to be listening to her. He was just standing there limply, staring at her.

Claiomh wasn’t sure what to make of his posturing suddenly vanishing without warning. The smile on his face, his clenched fist, everything... At least for now, none of it was a lie. That’s what it looked like.

“You have no idea what true despair feels like.”

When did the change take place, Claiomh wondered. She’d thought that he’d been talking to her in his usual flippant manner all this time.

Ryan gave a little shake of his head and held out his hand. “Well, if you don’t know it, I don’t want to go out of my way to make you learn. So if you don’t mind, could you just hand over—rather, return—the Sword of Korkt to me right now?”

“You...” Claiomh backed up and reached behind her to lay Freak Diamond on a shelf. Then she took the other sword, which she had intended to give to Lottecia, and slowly drew it from its sheath. As he watched her intently, she

stared back at him, feeling Leki stand much swifter than he usually did on her head.

Claiomh pointed the blade at Ryan's head and whispered, "Are you on that guy Ed's side?"

"Not at all." Ryan shook his head without a shred of caution for the sword pointed at him. "This is my mission—my mission as Doppel X, and that of my partner as well. My partner and I have been at this mission for a long while, with very different methods."

"Doppel...?"

"You don't need to know what it means. Though in a certain sense, we are birds of a feather, you and I."

"What are you talking about?!"

"Though he hasn't yet succeeded his name, why is it that you think a proud Deep Dragon is tagging along with some human girl?"

Claiomh gasped and pulled her sword back. "You know about Leki?!"

"Why don't you just try and slash at me? You'll find out the truth if you do. Though to repeat myself, I had no intention of making you learn this."

"What are you—" Claiomh stepped forward and... "Huh?"

She stopped. Or rather, she could no longer move. Not a single finger. She couldn't even blink.

Something black dropped down in front of her with a light sound. She followed it with her eyes. Leki had leaped down to her feet. He stood in between her and Ryan with his back to her.

All of a sudden, she became able to move again—his sorcery had probably come undone now that she was outside of Leki's line of sight. She'd been told by Orphen that a Deep Dragon used its gaze as the medium for its sorcery.

Which means... Claiomh staggered back. *Leki used his sorcery on me to stop me? In order to protect Ryan?*

"This little runt is a kindred spirit of mine, as one who left the sanctuary."

Ryan looked down at the Deep Dragon affectionately. “One day, he’ll have to succeed the name Asraliel and fight as the continent’s strongest warrior. Much more than I, he—”

“You’re wrong!” Claiomh mustered her voice and shouted. She tossed the sword to the floor and approached Leki. But...

“I’m not.”

She stopped at those words. Ryan’s voice was quiet. And it was all the more clear coming from this man, who had been so completely fake all this time. He was not lying now.

“This dragon will one day return to Fenrir’s Forest and take up the burden of eliminating unwary intruders, as well as fighting against destruction. No Fenrir has the ego to reject such a role. That is why they are the ultimate warriors of Kiesalhima. There is nothing else on this continent, dragons included, that compares to them, who devote their entire lives to fighting. But even they...” Ryan’s voice had been building, but with a short puff of air that may have been a sigh, it suddenly quieted. “Even they die without exception when they face destruction. *That* is what despair is. It renders all meaningless. It is the void!”

“You’re wrong!”

“I’m not wrong. Because they are fated to die fighting, they inherit their names. They give their names to their children before they die, and once they’ve done so, they face their battle.”

“You’re wrong!” Claiomh raised her voice further. Leki still had his back to her. But she didn’t care. She screamed as loud as she could, “You’re wrong! You’re wrong! I won’t let him do it! I won’t let something like that happen to him! I’m sure Leki doesn’t want—”

“Fhuuuuuwhoooooa...”

Claiomh’s words were cut off by a strange sound. She listened to it, dumbfounded. It was sharp and high, like the sound of a flute, but also warm, and strained with sadness. She didn’t know what it meant, but it seemed to spread through her agitated brain.

She found herself looking down.

Leki had his head pointed upward, his mouth open in a little howl.

“Huh...?” Claiomh stared at him, uncomprehending. She shivered. She couldn’t think of a single time Leki had made any sort of noise up until now—even when walking, or hitting his tail against the ground, he had made no noise. Never mind howling, she didn’t think he had ever even opened his mouth before. There were even times when she’d panicked, thinking he’d collapsed and wasn’t breathing, but he was just sleeping. Orphen had told her that Deep Dragons were just like that. Soundless hunters... In other words, warriors.

And Leki was howling. All she saw when she looked up was a ceiling with cobwebs on it, but Leki had his face raised as he let out a long sound. His mouth opened just a little bit, he seemed to be calling something—or maybe he was being called by something. Claiomh had no way of knowing.

“The howl of a Deep Dragon...eh?” Ryan muttered, unable to conceal his surprise. “Not something you hear every day... What could it mean?”

Suddenly, Leki lowered his head. The howl ceased. He was back to the regular Leki.

It had only taken a moment, but Claiomh didn’t miss the strained look on Ryan’s face. She felt a twisted satisfaction in witnessing it before...

Everything was enveloped in light.



That’s right. She reminds me of Claiomh, Majic thought as he watched Lottecia silently face off against Ed.

He wasn’t sure why he thought that. There wasn’t really a single thing about them that looked similar.

Lottecia Crewbstar—she was a master swordswoman with a decent amount of trainees. She was philosophical, well-mannered, and composed. As for their appearances, the only thing they shared was a similar age.

She stood there, wooden sword in hand, waiting for Claiomh to return. Majic was certain she was irritated—it was taking Claiomh too long. But she wasn’t showing it, maintaining her calm with her head bowed.

“Isn’t she taking too long?!” It was Volkan who finally spoke up. He was tapping his toes against the floor, his face twisted in irritation. “Anyway, if you’re going to make the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the Great Vulcano Volkan wait, the least you could do is offer him some tea and sweets and a bribe. Does nobody here have any manners? It’s impossible to comprehend. For this, I think death by growing out of the ground is the only possible punishment.”

“Upset no one’s given you anything, are you, Brother?” Dortin said calmly.

Most ignored him, but a change suddenly came over Ed’s face, when he’d been completely unruffled up until now. He glared at the door leading to the back of the dojo and muttered, “She’s a bit *too* late, isn’t she?”

Lottecia turned around too. Since Majic was near the door, he felt an awkward sense of responsibility and waved his hands, flustered.

“Uh...err, Claiomh’s...you know, meticulous. She’s probably picking the sword...right?” he said haltingly.

Ed ignored him, however. “Why’d the two of them both go, anyway?”

“You think they’re running away with the sword?” Lottecia snorted. “A sword no one even knows how to use? All that thing is is a symbol of the headship of this dojo—”

“You’re an idiot,” Ed told her coldly. Another stir went through the trainees, but Ed ignored them as if they had never been a concern of his and took a step forward. “Just shut up and move aside. Stop this.”

“I will not,” Lottecia told him resolutely.

Ed’s face darkened. “What do you think you can do, after all you’ve done so far is run away from me?”

“It’s you who doesn’t understand anything.” She leaped back nimbly and held up her wooden sword. “The reason I left you alone is because if I ever had to get serious with you...I’m not confident I could stop myself from killing you.”

“That’s a good reason... Much better than when we split.” Ed held his sword up as well, in one hand, without any particular stance.

“Huh...?” Seeing that reminded Majic of something. More than Lottecia

resembling Claiomh, the sight of Ed standing like that brought something familiar to Majic's mind, but he couldn't figure out what it was right away.

But his reverie was interrupted by Lottecia's ghost-like voice. "I have my pride," she said in a trembling voice as she stepped forward. Her tone was lower and she was biting her lip. "But when my father died and I was lost...I couldn't do anything. I wanted you to support me! I wanted us to support each other, even if it was fake, even if we were only going through the motions... I didn't care if it was all a lie."

Majic lost track of time listening to her voice. He didn't know why it was, but a sense of urgency, like he had to be doing something right now, weighed on his mind.

What is this...? I have a bad feeling about this... Majic just stood there as the two faced off with their swords.

Lottecia shook her head and squeezed her voice out. "I just wanted a way to forget my sadness..."

"That you cling to others, unable to become your own master, is why you're an idiot."

Isn't this just a marital spat? Majic thought to himself. But they were pointing swords at each other. Weapons that could kill.

That's it! Majic suddenly realized... The appearance, the words, the actions of the man named Ed... He found it strange that it had taken him this long to notice, but he'd figured out who the man reminded him of. He knew now.

She wouldn't win. He shivered at the realization. She might have been a master swordswoman, but there was no way she could beat him!

"No!" he shouted. But by that time, Lottecia already had her sword held up, lunging forward.

In that endless slow motion...the sword and wooden sword didn't even cross. They went right past each other, proceeding farther forward.

Maybe it was fitting.

It happened in such a short time, Majic couldn't even close his eyes. The blade

that had been artlessly swung forward darted out in search of flesh. That was all that happened.

In the next instant, Lottecia fell to the floor, the sword carving a path to her chest from her shoulder.

Her small body fell limp on the floor with a quiet thud. A black bloodstain spread out on the floor of the practice hall, where the shoes of the trainees had left countless marks. She was, without question, fatally wounded.

“Lottecia!” The trainees all leapt forward at once with their wooden swords.

Ed met the armed group charging at him with nothing more than a chilly look. He pulled back the sword that had cut down his former wife and aimed it at his next target.

It doesn't matter, Majic thought to himself, despairing. It doesn't matter how many there are, whether they're armed... None of it matters! They can't beat him!

A sorcerous composition sprang to mind in Majic's head. Orphen had forbidden him from using it—the vast power of sorcery was too dangerous for him, since he still lacked control. But Majic didn't hesitate. That man named Ed... Majic didn't know anything about him, but he felt like he understood something—that *this* was the only way Ed would be defeated.

Majic held both hands up and concentrated. He formed the composition of his spell and deployed it. Up until that point, there were no problems. The issue was whether or not he could control the spell now.

But if I don't, everyone will die!

Majic put all his strength into his spell and prayed. Ed's expression changed as he darted a look over at Majic. He must have noticed.

“I release thee—”

But just then...

“You're wrong!” A voice resounded.

He thought the voice was telling him to stop, and his spell crumbled. But that didn't appear to be the case. The voice was Claiomh's, but when he looked

around, she was nowhere in sight. She must have been raising her voice somewhere else in the building. It was a small dojo. If you shouted anywhere inside it, you'd probably be able to hear it anywhere else inside.

“You’re wrong! You’re wrong! I won’t let him do it! I won’t let something like that happen to him! I’m sure Leki doesn’t want—”

Time in the room seemed to stop at the sudden unexpected voice. Everyone was taken aback, looking between each other with surprised faces.

After that, they heard a strange high-pitched sound, like the whistle of a flute...and at that moment...

There was a huge explosion, and everything went black.



The strongest warriors in the world—he knew those were Deep Dragons. Not War Dragons, who had the power to return all to nothing; not Weird Dragons, who had the power to effect miracles; not Fairy Dragons, who had the power to shape nature itself; not Mist Dragons, who boasted indestructible bodies; and not Red Dragons, who were peerless killers...

But Deep Dragons, who controlled their enemies without a sound and dedicated their entire lives to fighting.

Anyone in the sights of those killer eyes would know that.

Sensing the dragon’s intention, Ryan gave an order to the armor that protected him as quickly as he was able to.

He couldn’t conserve its power like he had several days earlier when he was ganged up on and beaten with wooden swords. He ordered the armor to protect him with as much power as it had.

He felt something slide across his body’s surface. Snake Green. The Green Gem Armor. That’s what the sorcerer who’d made it had called it...

The clothes on him transformed with a *whap*. Branches, leaves, maybe even a trunk sprouted from the surface of the clothes and spread through the small storeroom. They spread through the dusty, dark room, almost concealing the girl who was glaring at him with tears in her eyes and the Deep Dragon at her

feet, with its burning green eyes that were a symbol of the most powerful beings on the continent.

The explosion occurred.

It was the Deep Dragon's dark sorcery, a tyrannical spell that exercised mental dominion over even inanimate objects, that produced a huge explosion. The countless leaves and branches of the Green Gem Armor stretched out to swallow up the expanding flames.

How much can I dampen the impact? He closed his eyes, believing in the power of the armor. If it couldn't defend against the explosion, he would probably die instantly. That was what battles with dragons were like, and not just Deep Dragons.

The explosion ended up blasting away most of the branches—a powerful artificial tentacle of wood easily caught all the falling debris as well. The flames overwhelmed everything he could see through the crack in his eyelids. An explosion. The sound of destruction. Its might was such that it might just erase this cheaply constructed dojo from existence.

Struggling against it, Ryan opened his eyes as he was blown backward.

The flames whipped around like they had their own will—which they probably did—breaking down the walls and ceiling of the storage room. Almost all of the branches extending from his armor were turned to ash, but some still remained. Even inside the storm of destruction, they regenerated, trying to grow larger as well.

Flames and destruction. Ryan couldn't see their master anymore.

He shivered and groaned. "Ugh... So this is the power of a Deep Dragon who's made an enemy..." He held his chest and clucked his tongue. His armor had softened most of the impact, but he was certain he'd broken some ribs regardless. "But the runt still hasn't inherited his name."

He'd been thrown back a considerable distance—where he was sitting now was no longer inside the closet. It was hard to see through the flames and smoke, but he tried to make it back to where he was, his vision blurred by tears.

"I must...carry out...my mission..."

He had to bring back the sword. It wasn't as if it had any particular value, but he still needed it.

He sensed a soundless presence then. He raised his head and issued a new order to his armor, standing at the ready. He knew that he couldn't defend himself in the same way again. That would be too careless against a Deep Dragon. Even if it went well, if he took the same impact that had broken a few of his ribs, this time, it would damage his internal organs.

From the flames leapt a small black ball of fur. A Deep Dragon that was still only a few dozen centimeters long. It had forced its round eyes into as much of a glare as it could muster and all its fur was standing on end. It could hardly be expected to have mastered a warrior's calm at this point, and a Deep Dragon was easily capable of squashing a mere human being through sheer fury.

With the clear rage and bloodlust of a dragon directed at him, Ryan grew out every branch connected to him as long as he could—with creaking sounds, countless branches embedded themselves in the walls, ceiling, and floor of the building.

Just have to get the timing right... Ryan issued his next command.

He gathered the stretched-out branches back to him all at once.

The branches stripped off the building materials of the dojo and gathered before him after taking on the new mass. The thicker tendrils coiled around the baby dragon, capturing it. His only escape was to his rear, but even if he ran, he would only be buying time. But if this worked...even a Deep Dragon would be susceptible to being crushed to death.

With a roar, the branches joined with the smoldering parts of the building and formed a giant mass. The mass grew larger and larger, with a disgusting sound like the crushing of a bug.

When his field of view cleared up, he could no longer see the dragon.

"Did I get him...?" he asked himself. However...

He felt a weight on his shoulder and a chill ran up his spine. He moved just his eyes to look down...and right there...unbelievably close...he found the Deep Dragon on his shoulder, without a sound, as if it didn't even exist.

“It moved in the split second my vision was blocked...?”

When he spread the branches out, its gaze must have reached him. But teleporting soundlessly while suppressing the backlash from such movement was something even adult Deep Dragons couldn't always do.

“Heh...” Ryan let out a chuckle. There might have been nothing else he could do. “What'll it be? Are you going to kill me, little one?”

There was nothing else he could do. He already knew despair.

This is fine too, he told himself. Even if I die here...

Even on his shoulder, the Deep Dragon reached only his eyeline. Still, it sat with its head held high, aloof and dignified as a ruler.

He'd made a member of a warrior race his enemy. It was his own mistake. There was nothing else he could do.

The dragon pointed its eyes at him... A gaze that promised death had captured him.

Then...

“Leki! Stop!” A voice sounded.

A blonde girl appeared, pushing apart the rubble. She was covered in soot and looked terrible, but the glint in her eyes, at least, she hadn't lost. She'd likely been searching this entire time in the flames, all the while holding the Sword of Korkt to her.

“You can't do that! You can't...” she shouted at the Deep Dragon.

The Deep Dragon showed hesitation for the first time then. He looked at her and pawed pleadingly with his front leg.

But the girl shook her head firmly.

The dragon moved its nose through the air hesitantly, then suddenly leaped down from Ryan's shoulder. And just like that, he ran off under some nearby rubble and hid himself.

“Ah...” The girl reached out behind him.

At the same time, Ryan raised his arms, snaking one long branch out from his

sleeve. He coiled it around the Sword of Korkt in her arms and yanked it back. A moment later, the sword was in his hands.

The girl was dumbstruck for a moment that the sword had been stolen from her so suddenly, but she quickly yelled at him, “Just take it! Just take that stupid thing!”

Ryan wordlessly watched as tears spilled from her blue eyes. He ordered all the tendrils of his armor back without speaking aloud. All the rubble they’d been holding clattered to the ground as they snaked back into his armor.

“Nobody needs that stupid thing! Not enough to hurt people! To hurt Leki! Just keep doing stupid stuff like this! Until everybody besides you is laughing at you!”



She was just screaming at him, like she hadn't even noticed. She was so agitated she was probably confused. Either way, nothing he could say would get through to her right now.

Nothing he could say, that is...

"You want that sword so bad and you don't care about anything else, right?! That's why you do things like this! Well, just take it and get lost already!"

"Can't have that."

The girl's body swayed for a moment and she collapsed with a soft *thud*.

And from behind the unconscious girl, a lone figure appeared.

Ryan smiled wryly. *And now another one who I can't reason with is here...* he thought, holding the Sword of Korkt to him. He met the new figure with his arms crossed.

Wrapped in a black cloak and carrying a long thin package of some sort, the figure—Ed Crewbstar—opened his mouth. The mouth framed by his scarred lips. "I see... You too, eh? It's just as I thought. While you scorn humanity, you are still overly cautious. I didn't think you would act alone."

Ryan shrugged his shoulders and smiled. He couldn't hide the smirk that crept to his face when he thought that this man would be much easier to speak to than the girl.

His words slid out with his breaths. "You seem well-informed about we Doppel X. That's very...unnatural, is it not? I'd like an explanation, if you don't mind. How does a mere swordsman know about us?"

Ed didn't answer. He just glared threateningly at Ryan.

Staring straight back at him, Ryan continued, "Because you displayed such abnormalities on occasion, I waited. I could have retrieved this sword at any time. And retrieving the sword alone was my mission, so I wonder why I waited... I must have thought a human like you could not be left alone... Of course, things got even more complicated while I was waiting for you to take action..."

Ed was silent again, but he seemed to think for a moment and eventually said,

“I’ve stayed too long. Any more will be trouble.” He turned right around and made to leave, just like that.

“I’ll be going.” Ryan held up the Sword of Korkt and asked, “What about this?”

“...I don’t need it anymore.”

“You don’t know how to use it, do you, Ed?” he asked the departing man for some reason. “Isn’t that right? Secretly, you revered the swordsman Beedo more than anyone. And this sword is a memento of his... You just wanted it because of that, didn’t you?”

After Ryan had asked all that, Ed stopped. He glanced back over his shoulder, giving Ryan a look that was dark, sharp, and cold all at once, like a blade of ice.

Under that freezing blade, Ryan went on. “That’s why you couldn’t accept the fact that he weighed you and Lottecia equally just because she was his daughter. There was no way a swordsman like him didn’t understand the difference in skill between you and Lottecia.”

Ed finally opened his mouth again, but it was only to leave a curt comment. “I’ve never liked chatty guys like you.”

“Well, unlike my partner, I’m just a powerless human... A chatty one.”

“I’ll close that mouth of yours one day.” With that, Ed left.

In the destroyed, flaming dojo, Ryan’s nose twitched, then so did his shoulders, his throat, and his chest. A twitchy laughter bubbled up out of him. Tears spilled from his eyes as he laughed until he got tired of it.



Maybe it was all just a nightmare, Claiomh thought.

No, there were no such things as nightmares. All dreams were just dreams. Even if they were painful or sad, you had to face them and wake up.

But...she was tired. Exhausted. Tired of thinking. Tired of screaming.

I don’t care anymore... she thought listlessly. I don’t care... If no one will understand me, then I don’t care. Maybe I really am the stupid one.

Was that right? How could she possibly know? Since she had no answer, she

couldn't say either way. And if that was the case, then maybe it didn't matter either way.

Was that right...? She felt her consciousness clarifying. The drowsiness, pain, and sensation came back to her. She was lying face down and it was hard to breathe.

Claiomh slowly opened her eyes. She could see something.

The fire was dying down, though the dojo was trashed beyond repair. She should probably have been sitting up and looking around her, but she wasn't. Her eyes, which had just opened, could see something...

A fuzzy, blackened something. In the black, there were shining green eyes looking back her way...

"Leki!" she screamed, and she embraced the baby dragon from where she lay on the ground.

Epilogue

“Ooh... So you just happened to pick this up?!” his brother shouted, holding the red-painted, obviously suspicious-looking sword. “Wow...”

Dortin peered at him from beside him. He recognized the sword. “But, isn’t that...you know, the thing everyone was talking about ‘handing over’ or ‘not handing over’ at the dojo...? If it is, I think it belongs to that woman, then.”

“What?!” Volkan’s face twitched for a moment as they strolled down the highway, but it quickly relaxed. Dortin mentally translated the reaction to mean he was right, but his brother had come up with a good excuse.

“You might be right, little brother. But just think about it... The place burned down, right?”

“...Sure did.”

Some inexplicable explosion had occurred and the dojo had gone up in flames, so they’d made their panicked escape.

Dortin cocked his head, unable to connect the dots his brother was giving him.

Volkan held the sword reverently in both hands before continuing, “In other words, since the law says that anything you obtain from the site of a fire is yours, this is now mine!”

“Is there a law like that?”

“Yeah, the one about looting the site of a fire.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s about how it’s a crime...”

“But this is a grand achievement, my pupil!” Volkan ignored Dortin and turned to the man following the two of them, who was grinning broadly in that same cabbage-colored outfit he was always wearing.

Gesturing his emotions exaggeratedly, Ryan exclaimed, “Thank you, Master! I hardly deserve your praise!”

“Mm. For this achievement, I elevate you from Pupil to Brilliant Special Gold Pupil.”

“Ahh! I feel this glory alone might just light the way for me at night from now on, Master!”

“I don’t know about this...” Dortin watched the two of them, feeling like he was at a distance from them. “Well, whatever... I guess we don’t have to travel penniless...”

Under the autumn sky, the trio walked down the highway toward Urbanrama. No matter where they were ultimately headed, for now, Dortin didn’t object to their southward path.

After all, it meant they were getting closer to their home, Masmaturia.



In a way, all Orphen was able to do was help with cleanup, because by the time he arrived at the dojo, everything was already over.

Of course, to be more precise, when he got there, it could hardly still be called a dojo.

The problem plaguing the peace of the town of flowers, Nashwater, was completely eliminated in a mere couple of hours. The two dojos in the town were both burned down at almost the same exact time.

Of those who were unconscious at the site of the fire, the most heavily injured was, needless to say, Lottecia, who had lost a lot of blood. She lay in a hospital bed, still unconscious, and Orphen stood next to her, looking down at her. The only reason she hadn’t lost her life was because Leky had been there. He must have liked the clean hospital sheets or something, because he was lying on top of her right now, in a little divot he’d made for himself.

“They can’t get away with this!” The one yelling in anger was, of course, Claiomh, who’d taken up position on the other side of the bed. She’d been yelling like that ever since getting the gist of the situation from Majic. “You feel the same way, don’t you, Orphen?! This is just too awful! He really tried to kill Lotte!”

“...I still haven’t even seen this guy’s face.” That was probably why he couldn’t really feel as angry as Claiomh. Regardless, she continued her tirade. The nurses were giving her irritated looks every time they passed by, but she was apparently unable to lower her voice even if she had noticed.

Orphen sighed and glanced at the next bed over. Majic seemed to have taken the most damage from the explosion and was currently bedridden due to a back injury. He was lying face down and looked rather pitiful, mumbling in a voice that sounded both afraid and angry.

“He really was awful...” he murmured in a rare criticism of someone else. “After the explosion, all the trainees jumped on him at once, but he beat them all down without even using his sword. He could have done the same to Lottecia, but he used a real sword against her.”

“Anyway, he can’t get away with it!” Claiomh howled at the heavens. Orphen almost felt like he could see flames in her eyes.

Cleaning up, eh...? Orphen put a hand to his forehead.

The whole situation couldn’t simply be wrapped up as two fires. The incident had left behind a staggering number of bodies. The fact that there were no witnesses was good and bad for him—naturally, he came under suspicion due to his asking about the dojos at the police station right before they burned down, and he’d spent the last twenty-four hours or so being questioned. Since everyone who’d witnessed Helpart had been killed, it wasn’t easy to convince the police of his existence, but the authorities had been able to conclude that the crime had been committed using sorcery. It seemed like the case was going to wrap up with Helpart going on the wanted list as a mysterious, unidentified sorcerer. Luckily, no one had witnessed Orphen using sorcery and the elderly officer who’d spoken with him didn’t remember the crest Orphen had been wearing, so he’d finally been released.

Things were simpler regarding Lottecia’s dojo, since there were plenty of witnesses. Everyone involved in the incident had survived and could testify about what had happened. Ed had been identified as the culprit, and was wanted for the crime. He’d been witnessed leaving the town, so his arrest would be the job of the dispatch police.

Still, none of this was really cleanup.

Nothing about this incident had been resolved, after all.

Orphen closed his eyes and murmured, “Well, since both this Ryan guy and Ed have left the town, as long as they’re not marching through the wilderness, they can really only be heading for Urbanrama...”

“And we’ll catch up to them no matter what it takes! They are NOT getting away with this!” Claiomh’s nostrils were flared. Orphen was almost worried all her huffing and puffing was going to wake up Lottecia; it was so loud.

She picked up the picture frame beside Lottecia’s bed and thrust it out at Orphen, rapidly saying, “It’s this guy, this guy! Ed! Get a good look at him, okay? The next time we see him, we’ll show him no mercy, okay?! I’m gonna give him a beating so bad he’ll regret being alive! And Ryan! Him too! He mocked me!”

Orphen took the picture frame and sighed. *Well, it beats her moping, I guess...* He did wish she would take a break every once in a while, though...

He gave her the occasional “mhm” or “uh huh” at appropriate intervals, and...suddenly noticed something.

Orphen stopped breathing. He felt like a layer of darkness had suddenly blanketed the world in front of him.

“This is...Ed...?” Orphen asked when he saw the man in the picture.

Afterword

“Alriiight, it’s the end of lucky volume number thirteen! I’ll be your guide! People call me the Great Angel of Hama, my special skill is the endless apology, my distance record is three hundred yards or so, the sexy dynamite & pretty diamond, Pririkuchilip Kitororono Brilliant Kemiko, also known as Nagano Sayuri! Well, are you all ready?”

“Wait, who the hell are youuu?! (Kick)”

“Agh?! K-Kfh... For a rotten author, that was a pretty killer kick...”

“Will you shut up already? Seriously, who are you?”

“You forgot?! You always feature a heroine that only shows up once at the end of your books, don’t you?!”

“Well, there wasn’t a one-time heroine this time, so I was actually wondering what I should do with this one.”

“Oh, come on... There wasn’t a heroine? There was me, wasn’t there?”

“No, I’m pretty sure there wasn’t a Kemiko in this book.”

“Geez... Check around page 28.”

“Yeah, no, you’re not there.”

“Could you just add me in around there, then?”

“No!”

“Stingy!”

“Argh! Well, maybe this is a good opportunity, since I’ve written this much already... Let’s get things back on track. I’ve finally written volume thirteen of this series. Maybe it’s some kind of reaction to my attempt to write a story that had nothing to do with the main plot last time, but we’ve rebounded into some intensely relevant stuff now.”

“There were a lot of new characters too.”

“Well, that’s fine. I think the story ended up a little on the short side, though.”

“Mhm.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t just write about work, though. You know, lately I’m really into airsoft guns.”

“?”

“Well, I was kinda into them before, but I saw a really good one for sale recently. I don’t really care if they’re realistic or detailed. I just sort of collect them if I like the feel of them. I kinda really like toys of weapons and stuff.”

“Come to think of it, you’ve got model swords and stuff in your room, don’t you?”

“Mhm. I don’t want any with real blades though, since that’s kind of scary. So anyway, you might see a stray Akita wandering around places that sell all sorts of airsoft guns, since he’s really into it right now. Yep!”

“‘Yep’?”

“Somebody please take Akita to an airsoft game.”

“Hmm. What do you do in those?”

“Oh, you know, shoot your allies, run and hide, tell lies.”

“You just want to ruin everyone’s fun, huh?”

“Ooh, I want this grenade. Look, it says it flies. There’s something really attractive about shotguns too, don’t you think? I can’t really bring myself to buy one, though.”

“Hey, put that catalog away! Do you even have time to play with this stuff?”

“Not really...but I can make time!”

“(Kick)”

“...Why are you kicking me?”

“‘Cause you’re being full of yourself. How are you gonna make time, anyway?”

“Method one: Finish my manuscript early. Method two: Give up on my

manuscript early.”

“Not much I can say about that, is there...”

“Ooh. This H&K USP looks nice, doesn’t it?”

“And now he’s looking at the catalog again.”

“Oh, what does it matter? Alright, to get serious again... We’re getting to a good stopping point with this series again, so I’d really like to start up a new one sometime soon. Within the year...? I wonder if I can do that... (Timidly)”

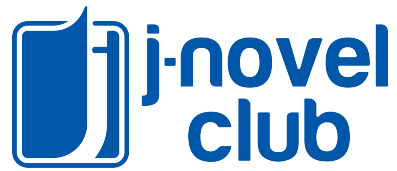
“Get to work already.”

“Okaaay. We’ll cut things off here, then. Let’s meet again at the end of the next one!”

“And I’ll debut in the next one!”

“No you won’t!”

Yoshinobu Akita, March 1999



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Sorcerous Stabber Orphen: The Wayward Journey Volume 13

by Yoshinobu Akita

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